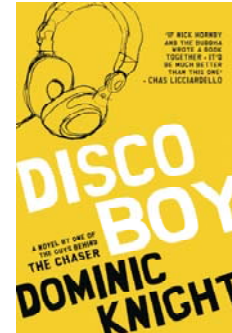




RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA

Disco Boy
by Dominic Knight

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#40

CELEBRATION

KOOL AND THE GANG (1980)

I looked out across the dancefloor at the punters bathed in refracted mirrorball light, clutching at one another to avoid collapsing onto the garish carpet, and asked the question every low-rent DJ asks themselves near the end of a gig. Were these people ready to shake their tailfeathers?

They were. Some of them, I regret to say, even loop de looped. But hey, I didn't make the rule that every playlist has to feature The Blues Brothers. Just like I didn't decide that Ricky Martin's 'Livin' La Vida Loca' was still fit for public consumption, or that anyone should ever be asked to do the 'Time Warp' again. I just learned what people like and played it to them. Because DJing at the shabbier end of the social spectrum is ultimately about democracy. Which makes a great argument for dictatorship.

I'd chosen a twenty-first birthday at the Waverton Bowls Club, the premier registered club in one of Sydney's sleepier harbourside suburbs, because my other option was a fiftieth at the Gordon Rugby Club, and I generally preferred being humiliated because some of the guests were friends of mine as opposed to friends of my parents. Also, being twenty-five myself, twenty-firsts weren't such a distant memory that I had difficulty choosing what to play.

I'd learned a thing or two in six years of DJing. Sure, it was mostly stuff like which Ace of Base songs people remember, but there's a time and place when even that dubious knowledge is useful. So I followed up 'Shake Your Tailfeather' with 'All That She Wants', and they loved it. My skills wouldn't have helped in a pumping superclub on the fair island of Ibiza, but you could give me – well, not two turntables and a microphone, as Beck put it. But give me two CD players and a box of greatest hits compilations, and I could pump up the jam, pump it up, while your feet are stomping.

Besides, pumping jams is an easier way to make a buck than pumping gas, and it's not much harder, if you know what you're doing. It turned out to be a textbook gig – and yes, there is a textbook. My boss Phil wrote it, and it's the musical equivalent of The Anarchist Cookbook,

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the legendary internet publication that teaches aspiring terrorists how to make pipe bombs. Phil's expertise wasn't in throwing Molotov cocktails into a crowd, though; it was in knowing when to chuck 'Footloose' into the mix at an office Christmas party. The impact was almost as lethal.

Shortly after the party started at eight, I kicked off with the Run-DMC version of Aerosmith's 'Walk This Way' to get the braver guests dancing. Then I lured the shyer patrons to join them with Dragon's 'Celebration', Madonna's 'Holiday' and 'Come On Eileen' by Dexy's Midnight Runners. I can't speak for Dexy, but that song would make me run away from a dancefloor at any time of day. Nevertheless, the crowd ate it up.

Phil had taught me that the art of DJing is all about alcohol consumption. Not for us, unfortunately – I rarely dared to sneak a beer while I was on the job, as much as it improved it – but for the punters. So I gauged the crowd's intoxication by how raucously they cheered when they recognised each song, how raunchily they danced, and how many of them had actually fallen over. When around half the guests were well on the way to loaded, I started bringing out my black-label selections. Sure, no one wants to hear the daggy old 'Grease Megamix' when they're sober, but with enough VBs under their belts, even the most self-consciously cool partygoer will sing 'Tell me more, tell me more'. And what's more, they'll actually mean it.

I hate to quibble with Robbie Williams, but being a Rock DJ didn't always make me feel all right. The music was an issue, sure, but my biggest problem was with the patrons, and specifically the young guys who'd had too much to drink. Time and time again, I've seen that serving unlimited alcohol packages to twenty-first guests produces much the same result as serving moggies food after midnight – wanton destruction set to a cheesy '80s soundtrack. Fortunately, like Gremlins, dancefloor dickheads also tend to disappear when you shine a bright light on them at the end of the night.

A good DJ watches the crowd carefully, and throughout the gig I'd been keeping a disapproving eye on a posse of posers who'd spent most of the night propped up against the bar, looking contemptuously at the dancefloor. But by midnight, it was a different story. One guy with expensively messy hair and designer stubble, who'd put more time into his wardrobe than the birthday girl, sang along with 'White Wedding' like he was auditioning for Australian Idol. And suddenly his crew started getting into the dancing instead of sneering at it, and took over the middle of the dancefloor for some ironic posturing, pushing the regular kids over to the fringes.

A few songs later, stubble boy headed ominously in my direction.

'Hey buddy, this retro stuff is shit,' he leered. 'Got any real dance music?'

'Like what, exactly?'

'Like, I dunno, Ministry of Sound or something.'

'That's a club, pal, not an artist.'

'We want to hear bangin' tunes, mate, not this retro crap.'

Crap? My selection of songs was crap? Yes, correct – ten points. But I wasn't taking that from a guy wearing sunglasses at midnight.

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'So you've come to request something cooler, but don't actually know anything cooler?'

'Steady on, we just want . . .'

'Well look, I'd love to play something tossy for you and your pals. But I'm busy playing the birthday girl's favourite songs so she can dance with her friends.'

He threw up his hands, dimly realising he was being a dick.

'Geez, no need to be so goddamn touchy. Play that crappy music then, white boy,' he replied, staggering off to sit down with a 'too cool to talk to the DJ' vibe I felt was somewhat undermined by the fact he'd just quoted Vanilla Ice.

I'm not exactly Eminem in 8 Mile when it comes to a dissing battle, but intoxicated jerks are always easy fodder. To celebrate my victory, I fired up 'You're So Vain'. He and his mates sang along with gusto. And I hoped, like the guy in Carly Simon's lyric, he thought the song was about him.

#39

IN THE STILL OF THE NITE

BOYZIIMEN (1993)

It was a relief when the Waverton Bowls staff switched on the lights, sending the stragglers scurrying into the night, their eyes smarting from the sudden burst of fluorescence. I always relish the moment when the couple pashing uninhibitedly in the corner are suddenly forced to take a decent look at each other. No fewer than four drunken liaisons were interrupted by the cold light of closing time, making it a good party by any client's yardstick, if not my own. It wasn't long before the last wobbling reveler tottered off in search of a cab, leaving us to pack up. I welcomed the relative peace even after they started vacuuming.

I carefully boxed away the hardware, coiled up the last of my cables, and lugged the gear to the beat-up silver Volvo stationwagon that my parents had given me so I wouldn't die in a car crash. Or impress women – they were considerate like that.

Packing up was the least glamorous part of my un-glamorous job. Occasionally, when a dancefloor greeted every one of my selections with whoops, and girls were flirting with me because they thought my taste was cool, I felt a little like an alchemist, weaving the base, base metal that was the MobyDisc catalogue into pure partytime gold. But even on the few nights when I'd successfully chatted girls up, the need to wait around for an hour while I put my gear into roadcases quickly evaporated their interest.

The birthday girl's father slipped me a hundred bucks on my way out the door and thanked me for making his daughter's night. I thanked whoever'd given him a few too many drinks. And before I walked away, I handed over his receipt.

'MobyDisc,' he said, reading the name of Phil's company off the tax invoice. 'That's funny.'

He was wrong, of course, but I smiled anyway as I shook his hand and said goodbye. In fact, MobyDisc is a whale of a crappy pun, beating even 'The Foam Booth' near my old school,

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and a BBQ chicken shop near my house, 'Nick's Hot Chicks', which offers neither attractive women nor adequately heated poultry. Phil came up with the name, and he loves it because – make sure you're seated, folks – while most people think it's a pun only because 'Disc' sounds like 'Dick', from the Herman Melville novel, 'Moby' is also an abbreviation for 'mobile'.

'I love it because it has so many levels,' Phil was fond of saying.

'And so does hell,' I was fond of replying under my breath.

But I did allow myself the pleasure of telling him that while it was a legendarily good pun, it seemed a shame to lose so much business because everyone thought we only played Moby.

Before I drove off, I took out Miles Davis's Round About Midnight from my definitely-not-for-DJ-use stash. It sure beat the last song I'd played at the party, 'Nutbush City Limits'. My own personal limit for Nutbush City was down to about five seconds.

MobyDisc killed my love of pop music because even when I love a song the first twenty times or so, I get heartily sick of it by about the fortieth. I read that the Americans used music to torture – sorry, interrogate – people at Guantanamo Bay. It makes sense – honestly, play me Aqua's 'Barbie Girl' enough times, and I'll confess to anything.

Every time I drove home from a gig, I wondered why I was still doing this, two years after finishing law school. I always insisted it was temporary, but as my parents pointed out, it was beginning to look a lot like a career. I'd developed a whole range of justifications to defuse the question, from the socialist – 'I like being an ordinary worker, not a member of the elite' – to the artistic – 'It's about creating something, you couldn't possibly understand' – to the downright preposterous – 'I just do it for the babes'. But the truth was that finding a regular job just didn't appeal. What I really wanted was to work with another kind of music – my own. MobyDisc was vastly different from being a singer/songwriter, but it was a hell of a lot closer than corporate law.

Although my musical career has historically been confined to law revue bands and my bedroom, I've been learning guitar since I was a kid, and writing songs since I was an angst-ridden fifteen-year-old, kind of like Daniel Johns without the fame, fortune, critical acclaim or ridiculously hot ex. (Or the talent too, probably, but the jury is out on that.) In my more optimistic moments, I dream of having a career like Beck's – in terms of the eclecticism and consistency rather than the Scientology.

Many's the night I'd sat fading the Spice Girls into Shaggy, and wished I'd brought along a guitar to see if my own songs couldn't do a better job of entertaining the crowd. But I'd never had the guts, so instead I continued to sit there serving up the same stale hits as always.

I'd studied law only because my parents had told me I'd be wasting my marks otherwise, and I'd hoped spending five years at uni would keep them off my back while I got my music going. (It hadn't.) I'd even tried a clerkship at a big firm one summer holiday, and while I found the work manageable, we'd put in a lot of hours making foreclosures easier for our bank client, and it didn't exactly make me feel I was contributing positively to society. By contrast, as daggy as it was, my DJing made other people happy. Or rather, when alcohol had already made them happy, I gave them music to jump uncoordinately around to.

The other thing was that MobyDisc paid me \$800 a week plus tips – not all that much less than a graduate solicitor wage, for the relatively low cost of four evenings and my dignity. And it gave me even more time than I'd had at university to theoretically work on music. My friend

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Zoë often goaded me about how little I'd produced – certainly nothing I was ever brave enough to play to her. But I still believed I'd get around to producing an EP eventually, and if I joined the 'real world,' it would be as good as admitting I'd never do it.

Plus, as Phil never tired of pointing out, our job had 'fringe benefits of the lady variety'. Scarily enough, it was true: despite his burgeoning beer gut, handlebar moustache and fondness for funny-guy novelty waistcoats, it was a lean month when he didn't get at least a pash. Sure, to the casual observer he may have appeared well north of forty, balding and a bit of a dork. But come the right hens' night harbour cruise, Phil was The Man.

Whether through lack of opportunity or effort, I hadn't gotten any action in a long time, and that night was no exception. As I cruised back through North Sydney, which was mercifully empty at one in the morning, I told myself it really was time I did something about that.

At a red light, I switched my phone on and found a text message: 'DRINKIES @ STRAND WL GO L8, COME AFTER GIG NIGE.'

A typical offer from my friend Nigel. While I felt like some company, a quiet drink was what I would've opted for, not more noise, smoke and alcohol-fuelled boisterousness. But heading home wouldn't have helped me with my chronic singleness, so somewhat against my better judgement, I headed over the Harbour Bridge to meet him. It was time I got out more. That is, to places I wanted to be.

#38

THE LADY IN RED

CHRIS DE BURGH (1986)

The later a Sydney pub stays open, the worse it is. The genteel, quiet, pretty pubs are all in residential areas and have to close at midnight for the residents' sanity, which forces their tipsier patrons to relocate to dives like the Strand, where the clientele is even uglier than the decor. Judging by my nights drinking with Nige, I've deduced that the inspectors only issue 24-hour licences to sticky-floored hellholes that happily serve up doubles to punters too drunk to order them coherently. Which pretty much sums up my mate's taste in pubs.

The Strand is in Darlinghurst, a suburb that ranges from irritatingly trendy to seriously downmarket, and the pub is definitely at the latter end of that spectrum. It's located on William Street, Sydney's premier kerb crawled by transvest-ite prostitutes, who often stagger into the bar to feed their earnings into the pokies. It doesn't have quite the grandeur of London's Strand.

Inside, it's one of many CBD establishments decorated in the hope that a couple of tatty brass railings, fake wood panelling and some grimy stained glass equate to the charm of a traditional English pub. The interior does equate to traditional English backpackers though, and as I entered, the usual dozen were sitting in a corner, shouting unintelligibly in response to the Premier League football on the big screen. Honestly, the more English people I meet in pubs, the more I wonder why Australia ever had a cultural cringe.

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Nige saw me before I could spot him, which gave him a chance to bellow 'JONO!' at me, informing every single patron of both my name and how much he'd had to drink. It wasn't the most creative nickname – just my surname, with the obligatory ocker 'O'. But it was enough for the six other tipsy people at his table to cheer my arrival, even though I'd never met any of them. I guess they figured anyone with such a dinky-di nickname simply must be a top bloke.

Nige is a good-natured, loud-voiced larrikin who's immediately mates with anyone he meets. We've been friends since Year Seven, when we were randomly assigned to share a desk, and we'd gone on to law school together. While our social circles diverged somewhat at uni – his revolving around college and rugby, and mine around the law student scene – we remained close, and as an undergraduate I'd spent more of my nights than I care to remember crashing on an air mattress on the floor of his room at college.

To my envy, Nige's charisma always attracts women whose quality exceeds what I privately think his oafish, beefy looks merit, and as I shook his hand and headed to the bar to buy a round, I noticed more than a few in his orbit. There was no way of telling whether the ladies were from his work crew or just random barflies who'd decided to come and check out the loud, funny guy in the corner. Like Rupert Murdoch, Nige always boasts an abundance of satellites.

He works at a big commercial firm and was recently admitted as a solicitor. Nige's life, or at least sixty hours a week of it, is mired in the minutiae of financial regulations. Which is why he needs to compensate by spending as many hours of the weekend as possible drinking. Nige's life is a corporate T-shirt saying, 'Work hard, play hard'.

I sat down next to him and finally started to relax as I got into my schooner. It turned out all his friends were work colleagues from Morphet Jackson, the firm that had snapped up most of the smartest kids at our law school. Not uncoincidentally, they were often also the dreariest. Nige is an exception, which is why several of his colleagues had followed him to a genuinely horrible pub at one on a Saturday morning.

'We've just come from the firm trivia night,' Nigel informed me.

'Really. The life you Morphet's kids lead.'

'Just because you go to at least four awesome parties every single week.'

'Against my better judgement.'

'I've known you long enough to know you don't have any. Nah, Jono, trivia's great. An athletic contest for the mind. Separates the wheat from the chaff.'

'And which are you?'

'Oh, the wheat, mate – we were runners-up. These are our victory drinks, and I just knew you'd want to be part of the celebration.'

So he'd invited me here for his own amusement, knowing that if there was one kind of success I wouldn't want to celebrate, it'd be trivia. I've always hated how it brings out the hideous competitiveness in the most placid person. Even easygoing Nige is an absolute shocker when there's some petty intellectual glory on offer.

'Wouldn't have missed it for the world. Unless you'd told me what it was.'

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'C'mon mate – they can take away your security pass but they can't take away your place in the Morphett's family, hey?'

Nige was referring to the laboured attempts at friendliness made in the managing partner's welcome speech when we'd clerked there together. All the 'family' had required of its newest members, in ascending order of importance, was photocopying, filing and sucking up to the fulltime staff. And we were always getting trapped in conversations with HR flunkies, who were like those unwelcome relatives you get stuck next to at family functions. Their job was to constantly pretend we were all having fun so we'd sign on the dotted line. Nige knew that I'd threatened to throw myself out the window of their anchor tenancy in a chic new office tower if I ever went back.

'And hey, you know you could come back on board in a second if you ever decide to retire from your high-flying musical career, mate.'

But Nige's attempt to make fun of me went well over the head of the woman sitting on my other side.

'Did you work at Morphett's, then?' she asked, her prior efforts to ignore me temporarily suspended at the sound of the magic M-word.

'Sorry,' Nige said. 'Paul, this is Felicity; Felicity, Paul – one of the most promising summer clerks ever to have served in the Banking and Finance trenches.'

Felicity was quite promising herself – so much so that my chest instantly constricted as I took in her long dark hair, intimidatingly sleek figure, and pretty alabaster face. Even without Nige's introduction, I'd have guessed she had some kind of corporate job from her groomed appearance and general air of privilege – neither of which made me think she'd have much interest in a lowly party DJ.

Still, for the moment, her intense brown eyes had locked onto mine so I thought I might as well have a crack at keeping them there. Nige helpfully left me to it, turning to entertain the rest of his acolytes while I attempted to provide her with something resembling entertaining conversation.

'I was barely there. Just the clerkship,' I clarified. 'Although I'm sure my filing skills are still the talk of Level 35.'

'Banking and Finance is a really great section,' she gushed.

No, it really isn't.

'I'm on rotation there at the moment, I'd love to stay,' she continued.

Why on earth? The firm practically had to apply thumbscrews to make me work in that section in the first place. I'd only given in on the understanding that I could spend half my time in the section that actually interested me – intellectual property.

She asked why I'd left the paradise on earth that was MJ's banking department. 'God, it's the best firm for bank work in Sydney,' she said, a smirk flickering across her lips. 'You must be a very accomplished musician to have given up such a great opportunity.'

Cheers, Nige, for mentioning it, I thought.

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'Well, not exactly; I'm more in the DJing game.'

'Wow! Have you played any of the big clubs? Do you know Kid Kenobi or Goodwill?'

No, I only knew that they were famous club DJs of exactly the kind I was not. And that left me with few options. I could have admitted that I was just continuing with a student job because of inertia, and that no one had dangled superior alternatives in front of my face, but that was generally where my conversations with beautiful girls like Felicity ended. Especially as she would probably have shared my parents' inability to understand how I'd resisted the siren song of banking and her alluring sidekick, finance.

But I was saved from having to admit that I hadn't played in a single non-RSL club and that the most pre-eminent DJ I knew was Phil because my stubbly-faced friend from the party walked in with his trendy mates. I should have known. Given his level of intoxication, the Strand was the perfect end to his night. Most of the city's flotsam and jetsam washed up here, and that night he was very much in the drink.

It took him all of five seconds to spot me, demonstrating surprisingly accurate perception given how blurry his eyes must have been.

'Hey, it's Mr DJ. He's crawled out from under his rock,' he said. 'His daggy '80s rock.'

His pals liked that one a whole lot more than I did.

'And who's this lovely lady, then?'

'Aren't you going to introduce me, Paul?' Felicity cooed.

Great, so she liked drunk pretty-boys. I wouldn't have done the honours even if I'd known his name.

'Harris,' he interjected.

'Whoa, you're so cool you've got a surname for a first name.'

Not my finest conversational gambit, and he ignored it appropriately.

'Have you heard Paul here play his little tunes, then?' he asked, smirking.

'No, I was just asking him . . .'

'Well, we had the pleasure earlier tonight at a twenty-first. And I must say, he's got a magnificent Bryan Adams collection.'

She was as unimpressed as I'd been when the birthday girl had told me her favourite singer.

'"Can't Stop This Thing We Started", "Summer Of '69", even "All For One" with Rod Stewart and Sting,' Harris said, displaying an incriminating amount of Adams knowledge. 'In fact, this guy's got it all for one awesome party.'

Having had well above a trafficable quantity of Adams songs in my playlist that night, I had no comeback.

'You get paid for playing that stuff, Paul?' Felicity asked. 'As opposed to a restraining order?'

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She was beautiful, witty and she hated the right music. But this scumbag was hitting on her right under my nose, and using my stupid job to do it. Was I going to stand for that?

I did what any honest, red-blooded Aussie male would've done. I gave up and, to pretend there were no hard feelings, I bought a round. I would rather have gone several rounds with Harris, but that would only have made Felicity even less impressed. Besides, with that quantity of alcohol in his system, he probably wouldn't have felt a punch to the head.

When I returned with the drink that my new buddy definitely did not need, he was still regaling Felicity with tales of horror about the twenty-first. OK, so she didn't like Bryan Adams. But if she had such impeccable taste, I asked myself, how could she stomach Harris's effete clothes? His ludicrous facial hair? The prominent, sickly sweet cologne?

But I knew exactly why she could. The beautiful people have this innate super-confident way of communicating that we mediocre-looking types can't understand. So, realising that I couldn't have interrupted their growing rapport with anything short of a fire extinguisher, I slunk away to talk to Nigel instead. He was in the middle of a long work anecdote which had his colleagues in stitches, but that I couldn't comprehend, let alone find amusing.

It didn't distract me sufficiently from Harris, unfortunately. So I wasn't at all surprised when about forty minutes later, just on the off-chance I hadn't been watching him intently out of the corner of my eye, he brought Felicity over. With a grin that was even firmer than the wax he'd smothered into his hair, he pumped my hand and announced they were leaving.

'See ya mate, we're outta here,' he said. 'And thanks for introducing me to Flea.'

'Oh, my pleasure.'

Was evidently going to be a whole lot less than his.

'It was lovely to meet you, Paul,' Felicity said, a little sheepishly, since her rejection of me was so clear it could've been written on the sodden coaster in front of me. 'I hope we run into each other again. Maybe you can spin some Bryan for me sometime?' she said.

And with that, they took themselves off for what I sincerely hoped would be terrible sex.

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