A clubland divided:
a brief history of the development
of the danceclub in Durban (1980-2000)

by Roy Ché Peacock, Ruth Teer Tomaselli (research supervisor)
contributor: Deidre Donnelly

When the Group Areas Act of 1950,1 the Population Registration Act of 1950 and the Native Resettlement Act of 1954 were enforced, thousands of non-white communities were forced to relocate to areas outside of the urban areas of the Durban city centre. Laws restricted non-whites from owning and operating businesses in the city centre. This meant that, for the most part, any form of entertainment took place within or near the areas designated as townships for each ethnic or race group. Clubs that permitted inter-racial mingling closed, and people were forcibly removed to different locations. This broke up existing music communities and removed their source of income, and inevitably led to many of South Africa's best musicians going into exile (Van Der Meulen, 1995, p. 3).

Since the demise of apartheid and its corresponding racial segregation in 1994, the majority of South Africans enjoy a new freedom of movement to occupy new spaces that were previously closed off to them. Hence they can be closer to work centres and urban areas where their proximity to and consumption of urban phenomena such as foreign and imported cultural products disseminated through communication media is far greater. However, the effects of apartheid segregation remained during the first few years of democracy, when there existed a tension between old beliefs and modes of being and the democratic post-apartheid reality (Ballard, 2002). This could be seen among the youth in their recreational spaces, particularly in the nightclub.

The multicultural city of Durban, in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, is smaller than the other main cities of South Africa and is home to three main cultural groups: the Zulus, the diasporic Indian community and "whites", chiefly of European descent.

Non-white danceclubs:
the Indian and coloured experience

Amongst the Indian and coloured communities living in the Durban area, the beginning of danceclubs is one of shared support and respect in the face of a common oppressor. However, amongst the severely oppressed black communities, shebeens or drinking halls were the only outlet for entertainment during the apartheid years. Therefore, because of the common ground between Indian and coloured nightclubs (and the exceptional black nightclub), it is useful to view the development of their nightclubs together.

Before 1980, the coloured and Indian communities had already embraced the idea of a dedicated danceclub venue in the form of supper clubs, which incorporated dining and dancing. The first dedicated nightclub for the Indian and coloured community, Café Geneve, was closed by the authorities, who told the coloured owners to «go and open in your township» (Johnstone, private conversation, 23/03/2000). At this stage, under apartheid law, it was illegal for non-whites to trade in the city centre. This severely limited the social options available to non-whites. However, ways were found to circumvent the authorities. For instance in 1980, the couple who had owned Café Geneve, the Johnstones, found a group of Greek club owners who were willing to sell them their surplus clubs just outside the city centre and act as white nominees. This provided an opportunity to circumvent the inspection of the authorities.

When the oppressive apartheid legislation began to lift during the eighties, the coloured clubs took advantage and quickly entrenched themselves within the city centre. The coloured clubs were marked by the "spatial politics": the youths grouped themselves according to their neighbourhood of origin, with group membership and identification based on place. This was one example of the way in which apartheid's segregation forcibly strengthened the connection between race, identity and place.

The Indian danceclub as a phenomenon truly manifested itself with the opening of The Palladium in 1986. This club was built in the semi-industrial zone of Isipingo and in close proximity to the largest Indian residential area of Chatsworth. It catered for every aspect of the Indian culture, which at the time was still fairly conservative and socially contained. It provided the Indian community with the opportunity to appreciate the concept of danceclubs from a family perspective, thereby acknowledging and affirming the network of family bonds characteristic of their culture and social structure. It was after the huge impact that the Palladium made on Indian social scene that the community started to move into town. A communal musical and social experience encouraged a new reclamation of space.

During the 1990s, especially after 1996, there was a flood of Indian nightclubs opening in venues that were previously white venues, and a noticeable counter shift towards the outskirts of the city centre on behalf of the white danceclubs. This could be attributed to the fact that most white businesses moved out of the city centre at this time when safety at night became an issue.

In the mid nineties, the bhangra music phenomenon came to be popularised through the opening of Stringfellas, owned by an Indian businessmen. Described as «a sound and dance conceived in the north of India and born after long gestation in the subculture of London's clublands» (Jackman, Sunday Life, 29/06/1997), bhangra is the contemporary music of South Asian youth raised in the diaspora (Warwick, 2000). The music is made from traditional instruments such as the dhol, dholki and tumbi, which produce

the characteristic loping rhythm; songs that make use of a call-and-response pattern; combined with contemporary dance mixes. Bhangra brought a traditional element of Indian culture into the westernised setting of the danceclub. The irony is that this modernised bhangra was the product of westernised Indian artists living in the U.K., further proof for a thesis of the omni-cultural presence of British cultural products in Durban.

The high turnover of clubs meant that competition between the variety of clubs to draw in clientele was fierce and also proved that the nightclub industry had become an industry dominated by cut-throat businessmen who were riding off the currency of this newfound past-time for the Indian community. In order to accommodate the growing popularity of the club experience among Indian youth, some clubs started offering alcohol-free afternoon matinee parties for under-18s.

When Throb opened in Chatsworth, one of the designated Indian residential areas, it started to draw the crowd away from the Silver Slipper nearby, creating an atmosphere of tension and animosity between the two clubs. In March 2000, three men, acting upon instruction from the owner of Silver Slipper nightclub, entered a matinee session at the Chatsworth Throb. One of the men released a canister of tear gas, which created large-scale pandemonium amongst the crowd, who were mostly schoolchildren enjoying their first hours of the school holiday. As a result of the ensuing panic and lack of adequate emergency exits, thirteen children died. It was thought that by releasing this canister into a full nightclub, the Throb patrons would then leave that venue and go to the Silver Slipper. This event sent shockwaves through the Indian community and has left a sour taste in the mouths of a group of people who eagerly embraced the culture of the danceclub. This proved to be one of the most shocking examples of “a clubland divided”.