

# DEF CON

1984 - 1993

**JOHN STAPLETON**  
**IAN DARK**

**John Stapleton and Ian Dark were into the scene before they became Def Con by collecting records and putting up graffiti respectively. By the late Eighties Def Con were so popular they were able to introduce new music to the jams. They were innovators and continue to re-invent themselves...**



## JOHN STAPLETON

“ I moved to Bristol at the end of the 1970s and already used to buy loads of tunes. I would turn up at parties with a carrier bag full of tunes and just hog the stereo, I kept at it like that for a while really until I started DJing at friends' parties. Then in 1983 someone asked me to DJ at a benefit night at the Western Star Domino Club, the bloke who owned the club then asked me if I wanted to come down and do every Friday, this was my first proper night. I then met up with a guy called Sebastian Boyle who was a student at Bristol University who wanted to start a club night and needed some DJs, so it was me, Ian Dark, Sebastian and another guy who were doing this night called Club Foot at the Tropic Club, we played Electro and 70s funk – this was around 1984.

What got me into hip hop originally was hearing John Peel playing **Grand Master Flash – Adventures on the Wheels of Steel** and I thought, ‘What the fuck is that!’ and went out and bought a copy, which took a while and it cost £5 on Import which I thought was a lot, but I just played it to death. But another thing that got me into it was seeing Wild Bunch playing and hearing them cutting up Kurtis Blow and that kind of thing. I think

the second hip hop 12-inch I bought was **Tough** by Kurtis Blow.

I'm a kind of an obsessive record collector and have always collected tunes. I started off buying 60s stuff because a lot of it was around in junk shops and charity shops in the 70s, so it was all Jimi Hendrix and that kind of stuff. Then from there I started to collect soul and funk, but it was kind of odd when I first started to hear hip hop tunes and think: ‘Hang on a

minute, I know that sample on that tune, I've got the original'. It's kind of funny because I'm still doing it; I mean I'm still collecting tunes every day.


I think Bristol was special back then, because it was quite different to go out and listen to that type of music. Later when the acid house scene kicked in it was kind of like, that's what everyone did, but back then it was special. When we first started doing Def Con in 1984 or 85, I think we were one of the first who actually rented the whole club out for the night, like when we did The Rummer. But before that I used to play with Manfred in the Moon Club a lot, and back then they used to put a lot of dreadful Indie bands on and the DJs were kind of in between bands, and people used to just come down for the DJs. I remember one night I was playing there and the band didn't turn up, I ended up doing the whole night and it was packed and everyone had a good time and they still only gave me £25. I think the extra £5 was because I didn't have a break. They must have made a lot of money that night with the door and bar money, plus they didn't have to pay £200 to the band. I thought they were taking the piss a bit. So we went and hired out The Rummer and then it just got ridiculous, because at the time if you



wanted to hear hip hop, funk and that type of thing in the centre of town, we were the only place to go.

We did The Rummer for a year, then in around 1986 we had a Xmas special coming up I think the Friday before Xmas. On the day of the party, the venue rang up and said they were flooded. Steve who was our doorman at the time called a few clubs and got to the Thekla and asked what they had on that night, he said we've just lost our club and we've got 300 people coming down with nowhere to go! They guy at the Thekla said they'd got some theatre company down there and they were being really pissy so if you want to come down, the night's yours. So we moved our night to the Thekla at about four hours notice and it became our regular thing. They used to do theatre and weird kinds of performance stuff in there and we were the first to do a club night in that venue. It overlapped a few times – they had this weird performance thing with a guy riding around the stage on a unicycle talking about the history of England in front of about four people. That would finish at about 9.30, then by 10.30 the place would be packed full of people listening to hip hop.

It was always quite mellow though; there would be the kind of bad-boy element, the Clifton College kids and the

The logo for DEF CON, featuring the word 'DEF' in a bold, blocky font above the word 'CON' in a similar font. The letters are contained within a thin circular border.

DESTINATION  
MOON  
SATURDAY 2ND

**“Hang on a minute, I know that sample on that tune, I’ve got the original”**

Redland Girls School girls all mixing together and having a good time. By 1988 we had the Thekla as our resident club and were playing new tunes by Sugar Bear, Kings of Pressure and Tuff Crew. I

worked at Sidetrax Records for about five years and I remember being on the phone ordering new imports knowing that on Friday morning when they came in there would be at least 20 regular people there waiting. Towards the end of Def Con we kind of shifted music policy, around the time of acid house. We would start with acid house and then move to funk and hip hop, when a lot of other people would end with acid house.

Looking back now it was very special, but at the time we just did it because we loved it and it was just ‘what we did’. I remember when we did Get Off at St Nicholas House and people came down from other cities and were saying they couldn’t believe it, because of the tunes and the vibe, but we’d been doing it for years in Bristol. You would go to different parties all over the city and see the same people there, say if you went to an FBI party you would see Prime Time there and if you went to a UD4 party, City Rockas would be there. It was all mixed, everyone went to each other’s parties.

I used to really enjoy the Def Con Cooker nights where we had a lot of live bands on like Roy Ayres (the first time), Incognito and Lonnie Liston Smith.

I remember Wild Bunch and Newtrament at the Redhouse as being just ludicrous!





I used to go to a lot of different kinds of stuff at that place but that Wild Bunch night killed that venue because it was just so packed! But it was a death trap of a venue, no toilets, bricks and stuff all over the floor just as rough as you like. I also used to really like stuff at the Sculpture Shed. This was an artists' studio on the docks down by the ss Great Britain, I think Gary Clail and Mark Stewart played there a few times. There was a mixture of different bands, dub reggae and DJs there; this was another of these mad Bristol spaces at around the same time as the Redhouse. I also remember doing a party in Redcliffe caves once, this was a totally mad illegal party; we got a generator down there and set the decks up. I can't remember why the caves weren't locked; I think there was another secret way you could get in there at the time.

I think flyers were important then because it was before computers so most of the stuff was hand-made and we used to take pride in that. People would come just to get the new flyers because they knew they could get into the next jam if they had the flyer. It got to the stage when we started doing membership cards. Some people even started selling them for like £10! Then someone turned up with our membership card printed on a T-shirt. It was out of control! It was different to nowadays because you can do it all on a



**Previous page 43:** Def Con; John Stapleton and Ian Dark at the Thekla, 1988

**Previous page 44:** Def Con at the Thekla by Oli Timmins

**Previous page 45:** Destination Moon – Def Con at the Thekla, 1988, by Oli Timmins

**Left:** Get Off at St Nicholas House, 1992

**Above:** John Stapleton's Dug Out membership card, circa 1981



computer get it printed up and get Out Of Hand to package it all up and distribute it. It was a lot more involving then and nobody really knew how to do it, and that's always when the most interesting things happen.

I remember saving up and going to New York in 1988 and being blown away by all the stuff going on there. I remember seeing Afrika Bambaata playing at Mars Club – seeing the type of stuff that we'd only seen on **Style Wars** or **Wild Style** was just mind blowing.

I've always promoted my own nights and played at them and I still do the same now, it isn't really a natural progression, it's what I've always done. I think Bristol played a big part in my development in so much as I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing now if it wasn't for Bristol. I don't necessarily think there was one 'golden era' in Bristol, some people say their 'golden era' ended when the Dug Out closed in 1986, but I think Bristol always re-invents itself and will continue to do so. ✕