



Raving, We're Raving

What Gavin Watson Did After Skins & Punks

PHOTOS BY GAVIN WATSON, INTERVIEW BY BRUNO BAYLEY

In 1989, Gavin Watson went from being a documenter of skinhead culture to being one of the only people who managed to operate a camera through the ecstasy haze that enveloped England that year. At the time, rave was a revolution, even if it has now been run into the ground. We spoke to Gavin about those halcyon days when you could dance all night on one pill, and about the photos he took which are compiled in his new book, *Raving '89*.

Vice: How did you get into the rave scene then?

Gavin Watson: The whole skinhead thing was getting a bit strained. There were no options for most of us, unless you wanted to get married and have a kid. We still felt young enough that we didn't want to disappear into mature life. Rave came along at just the right time. All our friends went to the raves, and those who didn't fell by the wayside.

What was the atmosphere like at the parties when you first went?

All the skinheads came together when we went to the first raves. My brother Neville resisted for a while. He used to have power in the gang, but by that stage we just went anyway. We were like: "Sorry, mate, but we are off to the party." He resisted for a few months. It was totally fresh, it blew us away. It was a real force in the country, like a revolution.

It felt like there was a massive urge to get to these raves. Everyone who was anybody was involved. It was important—we marched in London and changed the licensing laws. If it had been a purely working class thing they would have stomped on us, they would have trodden us into the fucking ground. But it wasn't, there were middle-class people

and even fucking lords going to these raves. Everyone was involved, they couldn't stop it. The police just didn't understand it. They had never had to deal with hundreds of people having a good time in a field.

They must have known there were drugs involved?

Very little was known about ecstasy until that wave hit, it wasn't even illegal. Soon all the rules were changed. But at the time it was a drug designed for psychotherapists or whatever. It wasn't like heroin, where you could see the damage. The police all thought it was acid we were on! It was a weird time. There were these guys working their balls off to get these raves going, and I was just so grateful they did.

Were you as much a part of rave as you were the whole skinhead thing?

As a person I am very enthusiastic, but I am always a bit outside of things. It was a fantastic release. It didn't take much to go there, but it's not like I suddenly decided that I was going to put on a smiley face t-shirt and a bandana and "become a raver". It just sort of happened, the other stuff fell off me. We still had our skinhead mates, but everything changed, really. It didn't take much to make the transition.

What was the downside?

It was easy for us lot, we were outside normal society already. We actually became more mainstream as a result of getting into rave. But the guys I went to school with, some had got married at 18 and had kids and when the rave thing happened they went fucking mental. They lost their houses, marriages, their lives fell apart. People didn't know when the party was over. The drugs took their toll.

Raving '89 is out this month published by DJhistory.com.



Gavin Watson: The guys who set up the parties were the wide-boy builders, the property developers, guys who had a bit of money and knew how to handle it but were rogues at the same time. One guy used to drive around in a Bentley, and just change the fucking number plate to whatever he wanted. He was a proper wide-boy who was in the right place at the right time. And that must have happened across the whole country, people who were doing dodgy deals anyway but saw the potential in this new scene and made the most of it.



I went to school with these guys. They had been really into the whole Rasta thing but it was a bit like the skinheads: everyone put aside their past loyalties and enjoyed themselves. The whole movement really exposed the fact that governments really do hate freedom or any form of expression of freedom. It was people dancing in a fucking field with no fucking alcohol, and the government just couldn't take it, they didn't know how to handle it. I think it was the fact that alcohol wasn't involved that scared them the most.



These pills we were taking were €20 a go—there wasn't any of this taking-80-pills-a-night shit. You took one powerful one and you were done. There were very few casualties, there weren't people with arms falling off from bad heroin, or any of that shit. The newspapers at the time went absolutley insane over the parties. The best part was they got everything wrong. They were so desperate to get any facts they could that they were even reporting finding ecstasy wrappers. Needless to say, no one was taking acid at the "acid house" raves.



Most of the police on the ground thought these parties were a godsend. They emptied the town centres of trouble, so a lot of time they would tell us where the raves were, just to make sure we moved on and their villages weren't clogged up with cars and lost people. But after time, the laws were changed, and they got the powers to confiscate equipment and so on. Still, any parties that were closed were always done so without violence. In general, the police had a rather apologetic approach in the early days.