

Eight Years On: Strictly Handbag

By Rory O'Keeffe

Strictly Handbag is more than a club. It's church for heathens – a weekly dose of absolution through dancing and drinking, or whatever you're having yourself. The regulars are an elite group of messers, for whom a good night out is well worth starting the week with a hangover. In fact, one of the things that contributes to the unique atmosphere is the absence of the nine-to-five demographic. The gainfully employed are a nice enough bunch, but you don't want them hanging around reminding you that you're not exactly greasing the wheels of industry by staying up until the am on a Tuesday.

Handbag started as a bet that you couldn't fill a club on a Monday night. It will be eight years old on the 14th – which makes it Dublin's longest running club. Handbag began life in the Kitchen, but found it's true home when it moved to Rí-Rá in 1996. Rí-Rá's relaxed approach to activities such as dancing on tables and a door policy free from social segregation make it the perfect location for a bit of Monday madness. Indeed Rí-Rá's lack of a VIP area fits perfectly with the Handbag ethos – this is not a club night for people who like to celeb spot between sips of overpriced champagne.

A-list types do come, but they aren't exactly feted. When Matthew McConaughey's PA rang to say "he's coming down, he'll need a bodyguard and his people will use a password," promoter Martin Thomas said there would be no bodyguard and the password would be Matthew McConaughey. One night Dennis Hopper turned up dressed in a three-piece Irish tweed suit, complete with tweed cap and stout walking stick. When introduced in that Oh-so-Hollywood manner – "Martin, do you know Dennis?" – Martin said "No, but I like your suit." Of course, Bono has been down a couple of times, and yes Radiohead have on occasion gone off on the dance floor to Club Tropicana, but no one really noticed at the time. In a really great club, everyone is fabulous.

Then there are the tunes: Handbag's music policy is an ingenious mix of 1980s classics on the main dance floor and 1960s soul upstairs in the bar – basically the greatest dance music in history that doesn't involve blips and bleeps. So while half the crowd are downstairs flailing around to Kim Wilde or New Order, the bar is regularly turned into a second dance floor by Dandelion, who hasn't missed a single night in her remarkable 312-set run. On the right night, you will find every square foot of floor, and occasionally the tables, chairs and bars, shoulder to shoulder with dancers representing every pop genre since Elvis joined the army – that and a generous sprinkling of stoned student types.

Every great club has a defining moment, when it becomes the cultural headquarters for a group of people who never knew they had so much in common. At this point the club acquires a personality which it retains as long as it survives. For Handbag, that point was the Spring of 1998. At that time Monday night in Rí-Rá was a given for a large number of people. You didn't have to arrange to meet anyone, you just went. Bands huddled in corners and argued the finer points of the politics of sound. Couples got together, broke up and shagged other people's partners in a manner that Appalachian rednecks would find a touch incestuous; it wasn't the most moralistic or monogamous of scenes. Although there was no actual dress code, people generally made an effort. The staple look at that point was nu-Mod – sharp but cheap. Handbag has never attracted a snotty, dressy crowd; there were always those who had gone out for a quiet Monday pint and been press-ganged into going to the club.

There will be a party on the 14th of October, but in truth, every Monday for the last eight years has been a party. Happy Birthday Handbag.

We have five pairs of tickets to the Strictly Handbag birthday bash. To win a pair, just ring 635 9822 and mention this article. First come, first served.

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