

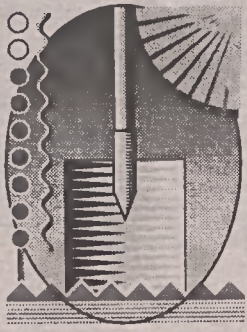
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September 11

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September 18

Kasey King, Gypsy Starr  
& Sharon Taylor

September 25

Tiffany Storm &  
Special Guest Jamie Levi

### Saturdays

September 5

Tracy Morgan, Gypsy Starr  
& Tiffany Storm

September 12

Miss Continental World  
'98-'99 Versage & Kerri Nichols

September 19

Victoria Parker, Morgan  
Richardson & Ashley Jordan

September 26

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LaTour & Cha Cha L'Amour

## October 2, 3 & 4 Carnival of Hope

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Bar opens at 5pm  
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\$1.75 house drinks all day  
Kasey's Cabaret @ 12:00 Midnight

Monday

\$1.00 Beer  
\$1.75 House Drinks

Tuesday

\$1.75 Beer  
\$1.75 House Drinks

Wednesday

\$5.00 All You Can Drink Budweiser (can)

Thursday

\$4.00 All You Can Drink Draft  
DJ Mike Plays Hot Sounds  
Ashley's Fun House Show @ 1am

# How Mel got his groove back

by Jeffrey L. Newman  
Special to Q-Notes

For Mel Cheren, buying back West End Records, the New York indie label he gave up control of nearly 14 years ago, is a homecoming of sorts. One of the early pioneers of the 12-inch record, Cheren, dubbed the "Godfather of Disco" in 1982 by trade publication *Dance Music Report*, has been away from the scene for a long time. Now, he's back in a big way with three record labels to oversee.

"I take my role as the 'Godfather of Disco' very seriously. I know I still have a lot to offer, which is why I have come back — especially in light of the resurgence of dance music into popular culture," he says. "What I have set out to do with these labels, is to use my experience and resources to further the development of the genre, and at the same time, help those people in need."

In addition to revitalizing West End Records, the 65-year-old Cheren has created two new dance labels, Garage Records (named after Paradise Garage, the former Chelsea disco he owned in the Studio 54 era) and Payback Records. Cheren's long-time business associate Kenny Nix is also back on board after being out of the industry for a while.

Nix and Cheren, inspired by Paul Newman's business practices, created the new labels with an altruistic purpose: all proceeds, less taxes and expenses, will be donated to charity. "What is most important to me," Cheren says, "is that I continue creating music with a purpose and allow it to serve as a model, so that others may do the same."

Cheren got his start in the music business in 1959 with the now-defunct ABC Records, eventually becoming head of the label's production department. When the company decided to move to Los Angeles, Cheren left his post and in 1970 landed the position of head of production for Scepter Records. He worked there until the company shut its doors in 1976, at which time he started West End.

One of West End's first signings was with Karen Young whose "Hot Shot" single sold 800,000 copies and became one of the biggest-selling 12-inch records in music history. West End went on to have other smash hits with The Bombers' "Get Dancin'," and Taana Gardner's "Work That Body" and "Heartbeat."

"There was no disco when I started West End. It was called danceable R&B," recalls Cheren.

"I knew people into dance music. I was the one who got Scepter Records to put the first instrumental mix on B-side," he adds, referring to "We're On the Right Track" by Ultra High Frequency. "It was unheard of. We thought we would insult people, but we didn't. We released one track. It took off. All the DJs were playing it. We ended up winning the Trendsetter Award from *Billboard* magazine for 1974/1975."

Cheren met Nix in 1979 when, as Taana Gardner's manager, Nix signed his client to West End Records. Nix went on to produce many of the label's mega-hits, such as "Heart Beat," which rapper Ini Kamoze sampled for his top-selling 1995 single, "Here Comes the Hot Stepper."

In 1981, Nix left West End Records to join the production department at Atlantic Records where he wrote and produced for artist Gwen McCrae. During a brief time out of the music industry, Nix became involved in the worlds of publishing and film. It was his discovery of R&B ingenue Shakeema that brought him back in touch with Cheren in 1997. Later that year, when Cheren formed Payback Industries, he named Nix president of the corporation, and each of its labels.

Cheren had left West End not too long after Nix. He was starting to lose close friends to what would later become known as AIDS and West End was on the verge of going bankrupt. The Godfather was desperately in need of a healthy break and a mental recharge.

Before leaving West End, Cheren bought a bed and breakfast in Chelsea and was the financial backer of the legendary Paradise Garage, a hip, downtown, New York nightclub owned and operated with his former partner the late Michael Brody. During the Garage years, Cheren's relationship with DJ Larry Levan (the now-deceased predecessor of current turntable superstars like Junior Vasquez and Danny Tenaglia) blossomed and together they created some of the most unforgettable dance

music of the late-70s and early-80s.

In 1982, with the onset of AIDS and the dying of disco, Cheren donated his building in Chelsea to a group of gay men who were starting an organization to battle AIDS (or GRID as the disease was called then). The group, which became known as Gay Men's Health Crisis, is now New York's largest AIDS service organization. "I was very proud to be able to give the building to them," says Cheren.

In 1987, Cheren, still on hiatus from the music industry, founded 24 Hours For Life, a not-for-profit organization of media and music professionals that produces fundraising events for AIDS relief and education. Legendary R&B vocalist Gladys Knight served as the group's chairperson. "It was a way to get the music industry to do something about AIDS," he notes.

In 1989, the foundation hosted "That's What Friends Are For," a series of benefit concerts with Dionne Warwick and a slew of other big names. Cheren soon became a financial sponsor for the developing LifeBeat organization — which today is the music industry's primary AIDS fundraising organization. 24 Hours For Life gave LifeBeat its non-profit status and Cheren is still on the board of LifeBeat.

"I've lost over 300 friends to AIDS. I believe one of the reasons I'm still here and HIV negative is to do something while I'm here," he observes. "Otherwise, when I get to heaven my friends will kick my ass."

### Dancing into the millenium

The new, revamped West End and Garage Records will feature "danceable R&B" as well as compilation projects. Garage Records' first release will be a posthumous compilation of live DJ sets by Levan culled from his years at Paradise Garage. West End Records' first release, which will feature new material by Taana Gardner, is due out later this summer. Payback Records will focus primarily on mainstream R&B artists, such as Nix discovery Shakeema whose first release will be available soon.

Remaining true to his charitable spirit, Cheren says his labels will help others in the music industry get started. "A lot of very talented DJs haven't had their shot at the brass ring, and now we would like to give them the opportunity. As in the past, we have no plans of following the pack. We will, as before, pioneer the use of unknown DJs as mixers and producers."

Nix believes the dynamics between he and Cheren should help propel the new labels to the top of the indie charts. "I am very excited to be working with Mel again. He has such an exceptional ear for music and the energy and zeal to really make things happen. In reopening West End Records and forming two new labels, we have the opportunity to create music in several genres and keep the music versatile."

Cheren has documented his colorful past — from the disco era to the height of the AIDS crisis to the present — in a not-yet-sold book entitled *Keep On Dancing*. He notes one of the things he hopes to do with the project is pay homage to the great music talents who have died from AIDS over the last 17 years.

"All of my friends who died were mentors to kids. There's a whole generation who didn't have one or more of these guys as mentors, because a lot of them are gone," he explains. "But nothing happens in life by accident. It took me until I was 56 to realize the depth of that. My getting into the music business was through accidentally meeting someone. Those casual meetings in my life changed everything."

He also hopes the memoir will be a tribute to Paradise Garage. "If you ask people around, it was more than a club. It was a church to most people," he firmly says. "It was patronized mostly by minorities, who don't have houses in the Hamptons. It saved a lot of those kids' lives. It gave them a place to go and feel safe. It was the only place you could hang out if you were gay, straight, black or white. It didn't matter there."

Although he's still shopping for a publisher, World of Wonder has expressed interest in optioning the book for the big screen. Cheren's goal is to buy back the former club space and use it to film the movie. "I want to buy back the Garage, put it back to the way it was. And after the movie is made, turn it over to a charity," he says. "Look, I'm not one to wear Gucci or Versace. It's more important for me to live simply and give it back." ▼