

The DAVE GODIN Column



COLIN CURTIS – LEAN,
LANKY AND SOULFUL

It is amazing how some people can be known by all and sundry and yet have hardly received any actual publicity from the media. For the past three years, **Colin Curtis** has been DJ at the Highland Room in the Blackpool Mecca, and has, by some miracle of personal self management, managed to keep himself almost totally unsullied by the controversies and conflicts that Fame brought in its wake for the Northern Soul scene. Colin is Northern Soul to his core, and yet has a degree of individualism about him that makes him both an enigma and familiar in roughly equal proportions. He came to DJ'ing via the collector's route back in 1966, and it was through meeting up with **Keith Minshull** that he really got into the Northern Soul scene. Together they frequented places like The Torch and The Wheel, and at about this time Colin and Keith were offered DJ jobs at a local club called The Magic Roundabout. Colin admits that at that time Keith was the major figure in their partnership, and as things progressed, they were eventually offered DJ jobs at The Torch. In those days the Northern scene was much smaller and tighter than it is today, and Colin smiled as he recalled how he and Keith had to subsidise their Soul DJ'ing by undertaking more commercial bookings too. "At about this time" Colin told me, "Mecca Ballrooms, who had previously not been very much involved in Soul music be-

fore, launched a Soul disco at Tiffany's in Newcastle, and I joined them as a DJ". Though the Torch carried on for a few more years, nobody (including Colin) seemed to be making very much money from it, and with the final closure of The Wheel, a lot of Soul people's attention was then drawn to the Blackpool Mecca where **Tony Jebb** was building his own Soul scene and reputation. "In the early 70's The Torch launched its own All-Nighter" Colin recalled, "and this undid a lot of the good work Tony had done of a Saturday evening. The Highland Room was severely hit, and Tony Jebb was even organising coaches to take people down to The Torch afterwards". The success and influence that The Torch had on Northern Soul has of course long since passed over into folk-lore almost, but Colin left a few months before it closed because he felt its closure to be inevitable. Trouble with noise and trouble with drugs ensured that the licensing committee declined to renew their clearance to function. Colin was still building the scene (and his reputation) at Tiffany's, and it wasn't too long before he and Keith were offered the opportunity of re-establishing The Highland Room into favour with Soul fans. "The public response was truly phenomenal, and we've continued ever since".

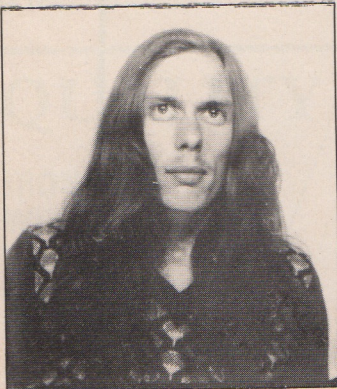
I asked Colin what he felt was the required knack one had to have to be a successful jock on the Northern circuit? "A good Northern jock must realise that he will be playing to audiences that cover the entire spectrum of Soul music, and also remember that you just can't please all of the people all of the time. One has to present the best possible cross-section of the music that one can during any given night. You must cater to any requests you get, and try to generate enough interest to keep the dance floor full". I asked if there was much difference between DJ'ing at an evening spot and at an All-Nighter? "Yes" he said. "A lot! People who go to the Highland Room tend to be regulars and are therefore naturally sympathetic to my approach to Soul and presentation of it, but at an All-Nighter, I

may in fact be very new to many people and so I try to be more versatile in my approach. This of course is very good for me on a personal level, since it keeps me on my toes and also broadens my musical programming". In appearance, Colin isn't exactly typical of Northern Soul fans, wearing his hair much longer than present trends and fads say it should be, and generally adopting an almost bohemian life-style that may deceive a few until they know him.

Since he had been the recipient of so little of it, I asked Colin how he responded to the media publicity Northern Soul had had over the last year or so, and in particular, did he feel it was a good or a bad thing? "If it helps the performing artists, then it's good, but the last wave of publicity certainly damaged the Northern scene because up until then it had been a truly "underground" scene. The first ever publicity that you in your column in B&S gave it didn't harm it at all since it merely recruited more devotees and like-minded people, but when you get "The Daily Express" writing about it, and claiming it's a "first", then you begin to see why I think as I do". Expanding on this he went on, when I asked if his concern was for the artists whose records he played or for the preservation of the Northern life-style, "Both! As I'm on the Northern scene it's perhaps natural that I should tend to giving priority to the life-style because that is most of what I actually see, but I have recently become concerned about the unfair distribution of royalty payments, and I'm disquietened when I learn from you that the royalties that I earn for records do not find their way back to the people who should get them". Did Colin think then that the North had been unfairly treated by the media and if so why? "Well" he replied, "it seems to me that when people realised there was not as much money to be made from it as they'd first hoped, they then turned on it, putting it down and taking the mickey from it as some strange sort of revenge. The media also promulgated an extremely narrow concept of Northern Soul which is at variance with my own, as well as many other people's experience of it". Was he then happier with the way the Soul press dealt with it? "On the whole yes. Mistakes and inaccuracies did creep in, but these could be and were corrected, and since these articles were generally only read by dedicated Soul fans, we were sure that they would give a deeper analysis. I'd like to see more features and articles in B&S about artists who make it in the North, but of course I do realise how difficult it often is to get such information. It must be an even harder job sometimes than getting some of the records!" Moving on

out on an ego trip of my own for a moment, I asked Colin if he felt my own comments on the Northern scene and its enemies had, on the whole, been constructive? "I believe your comments have always been constructive and always based on fact, which is such a failing with other journalists in the Soul scene. I think if some people say you've been rocking the boat or are overly harsh in your judgements then it's mainly because you've so often hit the nail right on its head! The truth can sometimes hurt. Some people tend to think that anything that creates bad feeling or otherwise upsets the scene should be glossed over and ignored, but people like ourselves who have been around the scene for many years do feel it especially important that the whole truth be brought out so that people can then make their own judgements. I believe a whole lot more of the workings behind the Northern Soul scene should be presented to the public eye, and this might then change a lot of people's outlooks and lead to much less misunderstanding and over-reaction". How then did Colin view the future for Northern Soul, and would he care to define his own understanding of the term itself? "Nowadays" he said with a laugh, "I don't really profess to know what "Northern Soul" is! The term is now five years old as you should well know, and its meaning has changed over the years. When you first used the term it was a definable style of music, but nowadays it tends more I think to reflect a certain style of life, and a general dedication to Soul music itself". How then would he define "Soul"? "Soul can only ever mean many things to many people according to one's given state of mind. To define every record we play at Blackpool as "Soul" is simply untrue, and as for this black and white prejudice it has been proven time and time again by records which we've all assumed to be black, but which subsequently transpire to have been by white artists. Does such knowledge really make a scrap of difference to what's in the grooves? Soul is something that comes from within, and like so many other things that come from deep down inside, they are not easy to define. Far better I think simply to feel it all." I then asked if Colin played UK pressings and/or acetates. "At Blackpool, UK pressings (and I!) are in an absolute minority, but I include several UK records of Soul product at "Strikes" in Burslen when I'm there on Friday nights". (21.00 to 02.00 each week). "The only acetates I use are bona-fide copies from UK record companies which they have cleared and squared with BPI". Did Colin ever feel such acetates were taking advantage of him or that he was being "used" in any

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Colin Curtis