

When thinking about Tony Humphries, you might be minded of his epic stint at KISS FM-NY as one of its greatest Mastermixers; or of his residency at one of the greatest US clubs, The Zanzibar; or, even, the walls that are lined with gold discs, from Indeeep to Janet Jackson; or his legendary eclecticism for throwing whatever works into the mix, from The B-52's or Rhythm Is Rhythm to Blaze. Heck, Tony Humphries is, of course, all of those things and more. But then, there's the Tony of today, restless, questing, searching for new challenges. Which, when you think about it, is pretty much how Tony has always been.

Few people realize just how deeply steeped in performing Tony Humphries' family is. His father, Rene "El Grande Combo" Humphries, an émigré from Colombia in the 1950s, was a prominent bandleader in New York, heading his New York Combo for many years alongside peers like Tito Puente and Eddie Palmieri. His uncle was the radical dance choreographer Eleo Pomare, while among his cousins are Keiann Collins, a Hollywood producer. The gifted guitarist (and Tony collaborator) André Lasalle, the actor/producer Kenneth Dixon and the dancer/choreographer Jian Piere-Louis who, says Tony, "wants to learn DJing from me, friggin' crazy!" Tony and family are pretty much the Jackson 5 of Brooklyn.

Tony Humphries has now been DJing nearly 35 years, an incredible achievement that in any other industry would have been rewarded with a carriage clock, service medal and a free bus pass. His big break came through a chance meeting with Mastermixer Shep Pettibone at the offices of Prelude Records. A shy Humphries handed over his 120-minute mixtape to Shep and then forgot all about it. A few days later, he received the following message from Shep. "Hey Tony! This is Shep Pettibone. I was the chillin' on the beach listening to your cassette tape, and it was fierce! I work for a radio station in NYC called WBLS and there's this new radio station starting called Kiss FM and I got a new job there where I'm responsible for 16 hours of music programming. Do you think you could put together four hours of music and have it delivered by tomorrow afternoon?" Kiss FM became the hottest station in the five boroughs and Humphries' star rose and his show went on to last for many years both at KISS and, later, HOT 97.

His lengthy stints at both stations were not simply an exercise in career furtherment, but a way of introducing new music and acts to the city of New York – and further afield. "The whole purpose of my two hours on KISS is to break new people," Tony told Muzik. "If you can't break them they you shouldn't have the job. Anybody can play to a crowd and play last week's hits and have people screaming. What does that accomplish? They pay you a couple of hundred dollars and you go home. People won't remember you; they'll remember the records. You have to make them think, 'that's the record I heard Tony play at Zanzibar'. If they don't do that, who are you?"

Tony's shows were widely followed by industry and fans alike – with the same sort of impact and reach to Pete Tong in the UK. Techno don Kevin Saunderson recalled a pivotal moment in his early career. "I told my brother that I was making music now. He's like, 'Sure you are!' So I go back to visit my family in New York. Tony Humphries is on and 'Triangle of Love' comes on in the mix. 'That's my record! That's my record!' That was so inspirational. It's one thing to make a record but it's a different level of excitement to hear it played on the radio."

Although Humphries was born and raised in Brooklyn, NY, he has long been associated with New Jersey and the reason for that is his long-held residency at Club Zanzibar in Newark, where he began spinning in 1982. Zanzibar became synonymous with a new soulful electronic sound, labelled the Jersey sound, but with Tony's hands at the tiller it was a vastly more varied menu than that suggests, since he was there at the birth of house music and helped nurture its development in both Jersey and New York. "It wasn't like going to a house club or a techno club or a classics club, everything was intertwined," explains Tony. "The hours were long, so obviously you didn't want to hear ten hours of straight house music. If you're going to pay \$15-20 to hear this guy, you want to hear the whole damn spectrum and whatever it is, it better be quality. And, believe me, you had to come with everything possible. Talking Heads and The B-52s don't sound like Zanzibar/Garage records, but they were. They were just funky records. I think that's what the Zanzibar's appeal was."

Just as the Paradise Garage created a whole eco-culture surrounding the club, so New Jersey's music scene was boosted by the fervour for Tony's sets at Zanzibar. Countless enthusiasts were inspired to become DJs or producers because of Tony. 95 North's Doug Smith is one of them. "He heavily supported [the Jersey records], but he didn't just play that," says Smith. "For me, he, more than any other DJ, played such a wide variety of things. It wasn't all vocals. It wasn't all pumpin' stuff; it was across the board. He was the first person I heard play 'It Is What It Is' by Rhythm Is Rhythm. But he played commercial things, too. I remember him playing 'Just Got Paid' by Johnny Kemp and 'Break 4 Love' and he was mixing it all flawlessly. There were no artificial boundaries. There was none of this, 'OK, I'm only going to play the Body & Soul vibe' or 'I'm only going to play the Shelter sound'. I didn't detect any snobbishness in terms of his selection. As long as it sounded good, he played it. I don't think he really cared if there were any people who disagreed with his selection. It worked."

Although Tony is often seen more as a DJ than a remixer, his forays into the studio have always been productive and, at times, transcendental. Even before house's incendiary arrival, Tony's remixes caused a stir and several are now rightly regarded as classics. His remix of Mtume's 'Juicy Fruit' has been sampled on several big hip hop and R&B hits and Fresh Band's 'Come Back Lover' is rightly regarded as one of the best disco songs of the 1980s. He has gone on to remix scores of artists from Soul II Soul and Janet Jackson (which earned him a gold disc) to Chaka Khan and Deee-Lite, as well as playing an instrumental role in mixing and breaking house classics like Mass Order's 'Lift Every Voice' during his residency at the Zanz. Poignantly, Tony was enticed back into the studio in 2013 by Frankie Knuckles who asked Tony to do a swap mix for a track he'd been working on. As Frankie told Tony, "You're a great remixer. I just thought folks needed to be reminded."

The DJ's business card, the remix, travels the world better than any American Airways pilot. Tony's reputation in Europe as the guiding force behind the Jersey sound preceded him. Tapes of his KISS FM shows had circulated among aficionados like illegal samizdat all over the UK and Europe, as we delighted over Tony's obscurities and the mellifluous voice of the mythical Yvonne Mobley. Alex Paterson of the Orb was one of those grateful recipients of the tapes, courtesy of journalist Kris Needs. "I wanted something different; cassettes were getting sent over from New York and I knew people up north were getting into house with influences from disco music – it was about hearing proper DJs like Tony Humphries, that's what really got me into house music."

His reputation in Europe grew hugely after successful jaunts to influential parties like Danny Rampling's Shoom & Norman Jay's High On Hope in London. He was coaxed back to Europe in the early '90s for residencies at both Ministry of Sound in London and Echoes in Rimini on the Italian Riviera. Tony has continued to travel, supplemented by many DJ mix compilations, as well as the timeless Choice compilation he produced in 2003 for Azuli Records, that was dedicated to his time at the Zanzibar. His latest mix compilation, Quintessentials. – done in collaboration with DJ Spen – shows the expansive range of music that Tony plays in his current sets.

Tony's first label venture, a joint enterprise with New York's Strictly Rhythm called Yellorange was launched in 1998 and ran for four years. The label ran the gamut of styles, from the soulful vocals of Mel'isa Morgan, Miguel Plansencia's Afro-Cuban flavors, through to Soweto Funk's Italo-grooves. Case in point was the label best seller Sunkids ft. Chance's 'Rescue Me', which has a deft re-reub by Masters At Work. Bringing it all up to date, Tony Records is, according to the boss, "showcasing younger artists and producers doing soulful music in a modern form. Keeping the soulful underground vibe with fresher sounds." Check Rame & Bonora's 'Sick' from last year for the evidence or, even better, Tony's own recent release Housework EP, which fuses blues, gospel and worksongs into a brilliantly contemporary setting.

In 2009, Body & Soul promoter John Davis brought Tony together with 'Little' Louie Vega and David Morales for a ten-hour session at New York's Webster Hall that was appropriately dubbed the Kings of House. Little did any of them anticipate the success that this would be, turning into a worldwide phenomenon that has straddled continents and cities. Tony's air miles continue unabated, his demand as a DJ undimmed, as summers are often spent travelling out to festivals like Kappa FuturFestival & Southport

Weekender, for whom he is rightly a staple performer, along with regular guest spots at Ibiza's Pacha. By now he's probably clocked up enough airmiles to hitch a free ride on Virgin Galactic.

What strikes anyone when meeting Tony Humphries is not what he's done or where he's been, but where he's going. "“Growing up in Boston, our biggest influence was the New York house scene and no one embodies this spirit more than Tony Humphries,” explains Soul Clap's Eli Goldstein. “For us, the gospel, deep, tribal sound he created at his Zanzibar residency reached us through the many remixes and tracks named after the legendary club. We finally had the honor of opening for Tony this year and we were blown away by his ability to represent the old, while pushing a unique, modern house sound. There is clearly only one Tony Humphries!” Amen to that.