

RETURN OF THE KING



Danny Tenaglia rides
the white horse

A few years ago **Danny Tenaglia** was the king of New York, the untouchable “DJ’s DJ.” Then the city’s club scene fell apart. Now the man who embodies house music in the US is back with a residency at Space Ibiza

Words Todd Burns Photos Adam Weiss

THE ROOM IS dark. The music is loud. There’s a disco ball overhead and Danny Tenaglia is at the controls. He’s just put on Pink Floyd’s ‘On The Run’. “I saw Roger Waters play Dark Side of the Moon at Coachella recently. It was awesome!” he gushes. Mixmag is standing in front of him, in-between four speakers once housed at Vinyl, the legendary New York club where Tenaglia started his Be Yourself party, and we’re listening to psychedelic rock. Granted, we’re in his 6,500 square foot loft in Long Island City, Queens – and not in the heart of Ibiza, where he’ll be appearing throughout this summer at Space – but it’s still a surprise to hear the ultimate stoner album issuing forth from the enormous soundsystem that surrounds us. “I was a pothead,” he tells me early on in our conversation, “we used to pass joints around at the roller disco in the early 80s.”

It began even before that for Danny Tenaglia. In 1973 the 12 year-old Brooklynite first heard a DJ mix records together via an unlikely format: eight-track tape. Paul Kasella was the man responsible and Tenaglia, being an early trainspotter, gave the DJ a call. (Kasella’s phone number was on the cartridge.) Turns out the two lived in the same neighborhood in Brooklyn – Williamsburg. Has it changed much? “Mamma mia!” Tenaglia exclaims, one of two he’ll let slip in our two-and-a-half hours together. “If I go to Naples, Italy, I feel more like I’m in my neighborhood as a kid than I do when I go back to Williamsburg. It’s wonderful to see how many vegan-type restaurants are moving there nowadays, though. I’m waiting for Moby to open up a tea shop. Maybe I’ll beat him to it!”

Back in the 70s, before the hipsters

moved in, the neighborhood was just that. A neighborhood. A place where his brothers became friends with local bouncers and convinced them to let their kid brother in because he was “just dying to see a disco ball”. Tenaglia pulls out a picture. “This was me in 1976 in at a place called The Miami Lounge in Williamsburg,” he proudly proclaims. Mixmag points out the mustache. “It was the 70s, you know. And I was trying to look more mature.” Now, Tenaglia is bald underneath his ever-present baseball cap. Today, the cap is white and logoless, accompanied by blue jeans and a T-shirt that shows off Jimi Hendrix’s face contorted in ecstasy.

It seems appropriate, as Tenaglia often refers to Larry Levan, a DJ he once famously compared to the guitar god. “I learned so much from Larry. He was my mentor.” DT soaked up as much knowledge as he could, once he discovered the Paradise Garage in 1979, and he took those ideas down to Miami six years later where he had his first DJ residency at afterhours club Cheers. When that venue was set to close in 1990, Tenaglia was faced with a choice. Remain in Florida and continue to build a local reputation. Or make his way back to New York and attempt to become more than simply “Danny from Miami”.

He chose the latter. “I came back to New York in 1990 with pretty much nothing. It was really like starting over... I didn’t have a steady gig in New York for years after I moved back.” As someone who loves both his hometown and DJing more than almost anything, it was tough to bear. But Tenaglia kept busy with remixes (Michael Jackson, Madonna and err... Right Said Fred) and productions (a rejected remix for New Order led to his debut, ‘Bottom Heavy), as well as DJ dates around the world. Finally, in 1996 after a short stint at the Roxy, he

It’s crunch time for Tenaglia



received a call from Twilo to play a guest spot with Frankie Knuckles.

From there, the residencies rolled in. Twilo, the Tunnel, Vinyl. But it wasn’t until the final one that Tenaglia felt completely at home. Always the professional, at Twilo Tenaglia found himself playing what the gay-centric crowd wanted, namely anthems, rather than the tribal progressive sound he was busy exploring in the studio. Tunnel, on the other hand, was too dark, full of the club kids that helped earn Tenaglia the title “The K-House King”. Like the baby bear’s porridge, Vinyl was just right. By naming his residency Be Yourself, Tenaglia staked a claim for himself and his audience – gay, straight, whatever: just do your thing.

“Let nobody tell you what to do/ Live your life and see it through/Keep on living the way you are/Just know that love will make you a star/be yourself” was the mantra and to say the formula worked might be an understatement. Danny’s weekly night at Vinyl attracted clubbers and DJs around the world to its spartan décor and unpredictable music (depending on what mood Tenaglia was in, he could end up spinning old Michael Jackson records or banging techno). After a five year, award-winning run, the music stopped in 2004, when the venue was sold for transformation into flats. “The original owner of Vinyl was a passionate rich man. He raised wolves

on the roof. When his kids took over, they set a price for the building and they held firm on that price, until finally someone offered to buy it... I have no regrets.”

SINCE VINYL’S closure, though, Tenaglia hasn’t seen much to love about the New York club scene. He’s been laying low and indulging other passions between his infrequent guest DJ gigs around the world. One of which is furniture design. The first thing I see when the doors are opened to his second-floor loft is a full-sized stuffed horse. “I got a bunch of stuff in the Hamptons,” he tells me, pointing to a lamp made out of a shapely woman clad in black leather. The piece de resistance – the DJ booth recently put up for sale for \$25,000, although he notes that everything is negotiable – is now in storage. Once occupying a spot in another room of his massive space, he found he never used it – why bother playing to an empty room?

Tenaglia does have friends over, though, and he’d love to have more. As we’re chatting about New York, the Martinez Brothers – the young duo that literally have the Paradise Garage in their blood (their father danced there in the 70s) – come up. Calling them great talents, he adds “I’d love to open up my place to them. I think they need to learn about how much more is ▶



“50 people or 50,000. It doesn’t matter. I’ll play Dunkin’ Donuts if they treat me right”

out there. I feel like the few times that I’ve heard them I’m still hearing ‘Rej’ and ‘Knights Of The Jaguar’ and I have some records here...”, he says, indicating the thousands of pieces of vinyl lined up against the wall. “that if these kids would hear, they’d go whoa.” And, no doubt, Tenaglia wants the spirit of the Garage to live on.

Keeping the spirit alive: It’s a point that he makes more than once. “I feel so sorry for kids in New York today that I almost don’t want to talk about it. They’re missing out on so much. I have to thank God that I was able to be at all of these different things, The Loft, Studio 54, Paradise Garage... I got to hear Jellybean when he was in his prime at Funhouse.” The list goes on and on. And Tenaglia does too, making himself sound a bit like dance music’s Zelig – the Woody Allen character from the film of the same name who is seemingly present at every crucial historical moment, and is able to endear himself to nearly anyone he comes across. In the film, they called Zelig “The Human Chameleon”. After easily shrugging off “Danny from Miami”, “The K-House King” and other nicknames, it’s not a stretch to say that Danny Tenaglia may just be house music’s version of the same.

The question is: who is Tenaglia right now? ‘Futurism’, Tenaglia’s latest mix CD, might be the best answer to that question. It’s a set of swinging

techno populated by the likes of Luca Bachetti and Davide Squillace, two producers who will be joining Tenaglia at his residency at Space this summer in Ibiza, and a far cry from the tribal house sound his previous mix CDs helped popularise. But what does remain are his signature edits, the ones that have come to define Tenaglia’s legendary marathon DJ sets he became famous for.

“I want to make something different for the listener and the producer that made it, so I work hard on these things to make them special.” The spirit of Larry Levan lives on as Tenaglia approaches every track like it’s a remix, adding a touch of his classic ‘Elements’ here or taking the vocal from GummiHz’s ‘Desire’ and dropping it in three songs early to foreshadow its eventual full appearance. Forward looking as this mix is, his sights are set on a sequel entitled ‘Pastism’. “I see myself as an educator, as well as an entertainer.”



AT SPACE, he’ll have plenty of time to do both. Entertaining on the inside, educating on the terrace is the promise. And Tenaglia is taking it very seriously. “If I can’t give 100 per cent to it, I can’t do it. That’s why I never agreed to do it before now.” He wants to be there, to welcome you in, to dance himself, perhaps get behind the bar and serve a drink or two. Feet sore after a long night of dancing? Take off your shoes at Space and you might find Danny kneeling down to give you a massage. You get the feeling that this is about Danny Tenaglia finding his niche in the world again, three years after Vinyl closed. Its success will also cement his position among the pantheon of dance music greats like Laurent Garnier, François K and Carl Craig who’ve managed to do more than just survive in the disposable world of dance music, but stay relevant and open to new ideas for decades.

That’s why, the rest of the week, Danny intends to get the most out of Ibiza. “I’m not going to be kicking back on some marina somewhere. I want to be where the music is. If it’s Monday night and they tell me that Sven and Richie are gonna be there, I’m there. What time do they go on?” That’s Mondays covered, but there are still questions about his own Thursday gig. It’s a day that, Cream aside, traditionally doesn’t do much damage

on the Island. “I’m really not worried at all. A lot of people have asked me that.” I tell him that Kevin, his manager, before Tenaglia came in, said that he was worried about Thursdays. For the first time in our conversation, the sunny disposition fades for just a moment. Tenaglia’s done hundreds of interviews and has already talked for more than an hour with few ahs and ums. It’s a rare stumble – but he’s quickly back on message: “Everyone just seems so excited about it. I just don’t see how it could fail. I mean to say this in a humble way, but if it had been against Carl Cox’s night or Sven Väth’s night, I think we might have real reason to worry.”

So who is he up against? “I think the only thing that Space feels we may be going up against is Monza. I don’t know exactly who their roster is, but if it is those Get Physical guys like M.A.N.D.Y., major props. That’s a lot of the stuff that I play. Two years ago, when Tiefschwarz and Kompakt were coming out with those things one right after another? Mamma mia! I don’t know what they’re offering now, but I wish them the best.” Scared? Not a chance. Danny Tenaglia’s already seen it all. And besides, as he tells me, “50 people or 50,000. It doesn’t matter. I’ll play Dunkin’ Donuts if they treat me right.” ☺

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