

Keith Flint 1969–2019

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Monday 5 March 2019, the first meeting of a day of meetings. Suddenly my phone erupts in a continuous screech of message alerts. Prodigy band-leader Liam Howlett had just posted that Keith Flint had taken his own life over the weekend. Keith was only 49, an icon of the 1990s. And now the world seemed to want to talk about it.

For the next 48 hours or so my social media feeds, direct messaging, e-mail accounts, mobiles and home numbers were subject to a continuous assault from a global media all after a quote. I have worked with The Prodigy for almost 25 years as their official campaign biographer, unofficial book biographer, documentary researcher, etc. I've interviewed them hundreds of times, travelled the world with them, seen them perform in more places than I can recall. I've been to their houses, been hideously drunk with them on more than a few occasions and witnessed first hand their growth from good time ravers to global stars. And I watched as success brought chaos and destruction to the band's doorsteps. They may have partied hard, but the hangover was long and torturous.

The question on every journalist and content creator's lips when they came to my doorstep for quotes? What was Keith Flint really like? In fact this is the question I've been asked more than any other since his debut vocal performance on 'Firestarter' in 1996. 'Firestarter' was of course the last truly great number one record of the twentieth century with its iconic video, featuring a demented monochrome Keith

snarling his way through a performance in a disused London Underground tunnel. When it was aired on Top of the Pops viewers complained and the BBC duly banned it. Flint's public persona now seemed frozen in the public consciousness. From that moment on everywhere Flint went he was followed by shouts of 'oi, firestarter'. It was his first vocal performance. Until that point he'd been one of the band's dancers. Neither him nor the band was ready for the kind of attention that would follow.

It all seemed such a long way from Britain of the late 1980s and early 1990s. A time when the subterranean free party vibe whispered its secrets to a hidden generation all chasing the smoke of a rumour like cats stalking shadows. Into that secret euphoria stepped a production wizard, three dancers and a soundsystem MC. They debuted with a fistful of ruffneck breaks and a party hard attitude at Labyrinth in Dalston, London's Four Aces Club. It was 1990 when the Prodigy experience was born. And Keith Flint's life changed forever.

Keith Charles Flint was born on 17 September 1969 in Redbridge, East London to Clive and Yvonne Flint. In the mid-1970s the family moved to Springfield, Essex, where he attended the Boswells school in Chelmsford where his mother also worked as a secretary.

Flint didn't really have any burning interest in music apart from a few punk records. He was a fan of the Jam because of their apparent combination of sharp style and youthful anger. The first record he bought was the Specials' 'Message to You Rudy'.

Flint was dyslexic and struggled at school. At the age of 14, he was suspended for sporting a Mohican haircut. Flint explained: 'I was chucked out and sent to a special school. They had to hypnotise me to settle me down – I just had so much energy. I guess I've always thought that, in a conformist society, self-expression is important' (James 2018).

He left the school at the age of 15 and became an odd-job man before working as a roofer at 16. The first among his mates to get a job, and as such he was also the first with ready cash at his disposal. He got heavily into buying clothes. But not just any clothes, he was after the expensive designer gear that the casuals wore. The casuals in many ways represented an extension of the mod ethic of working hard all week to earn enough money for good clothes and a couple of good nights out over the weekend.

When Keith's parents divorced he moved with his dad to Bocking, a village near Braintree, Essex. The two events caused him to go deeper into the vacant, yet aggressive casual lifestyle. When his dad quickly remarried, Keith suddenly had to get used to a stepmother and, more importantly, a stepbrother, Gary. Gary was the absolute antithesis to Keith. He was a laid-back hippy who enjoyed smoking dope, was totally against posing, and listened to music by bands like Pink Floyd. They sat up for hours, smoking, talking about the world at large, and discussing hopes and dreams in a way that Keith had never really experienced before. Soon after, Keith sold his possessions, packed his bags and went off on an eight-month trip through Europe, the Middle East and North Africa.

When Flint returned to Bocking his father showed him the door and threw him and his one bag out onto the street. He found a room in a big old house in Braintree that was inhabited by many of the town's nascent free party rave scene. One night out at the town's infamous club The Barn and he was hooked.

On any one night it was impossible to tell where things would lead for Flint. He might start off at The Barn or in London at the Astoria, and by the time the sun came up again he could be dancing in a field in the countryside, in a warehouse in London's East End, by the sea in Essex, or even in the Braintree commune. During these early days of raving Flint met Sharkey and Leeroy Thornhill.

Sharkey recalls her favourite memories of those days with Flint:

During the week on a Thursday we'd rock out at Rage, at Heaven on Charing Cross Road. It was the early days of drum and bass where I first heard Fabio and Grooverider. The club scene was getting harder and darker back then and the atmosphere was electric in the upstairs bar, low ceilings, sweat, grime, and a bass so loud it could blow your eardrums apart. The Dungeons on Leabridge Road was another favourite. This was an old railway arch near Walthamstow, full of gangsters and East London dolly birds. They had a coffin in one of the arches, it was proper hardcore. We'd drive over to Turnmills on a Sunday morning when Trade opened its doors. This was the ultimate in decadent clubbing at the time, a venue that opened its doors at 10am and

closed at 3am on a Monday morning – fucking brilliant! Tony De Vit was the resident back then, playing his infamous long sets. This would take us well into the early hours where we would try and catch a few hours sleep and crawl back to work. I always remember the lasers, they were wicked [...] And I remember Keith's wicked grin and Leeroy's fancy footwork. (James, 2018)

When DJ and producer Liam Howlett handed Keith and Leeroy a tape of his own tunes the duo offered to dance for him live. A few weeks later, with Sharkey in tow and Peterborough based MC Keeti Palmer aka Maxim Reality meeting with Liam and the others for the first time, the newly formed Prodigy played to a handful of friends and passers by at the Labyrinth in Dalston, London's Four Aces Club. Not the most auspicious introduction to The Prodigy but a step, no matter how tentative, on a journey that would become little short of breathtaking. Back in the rough and ready ambience of The Labyrinth however only two things concerned the Prodigy crew; getting a record out and playing the infamous Raindance rave. Within months both dreams would come true. The debut *What Evil Lurks* EP on XL Recordings, offered a deep slice of rough-around-the-edges, renegade-break psychosis. While only a month later Raindance offered four-colour lasers, sky trackers, strobe flowers and a bone rattling soundsystem with bass end set to stun.

'Being on stage at Raindance was the absolute bollocks. As far as I was concerned we'd made it then'. Liam once told me, echoing the thoughts of ravers everywhere. Put simply Raindance was rave nirvana.

By the time the band delivered the lumber crunching bass'n'breaks epic 'Charly' the rave scene had completely succumbed to the Prodigy's euphoric rage. It was the B-side's hands in the air, e-rushing classic 'Your Love' that captured the underground hearts.

Just as the mainstream had started to wake up to the rave sound, so the Prodigy had already started to move on. The debut 1992 album *Experience* followed a year in which the band had taken their beats into the charts and around the raves numerous times. Instead of doing the customary rave circuit to promote the album they took the rock and roll option of playing a headlining tour of traditional venues. Their 1994 *Music for the Jilted Generation* album drew heavily on a newfound love of rock and hardcore punk and saw the band taking their incendiary show direct to the heart of rock heritage with gigs in venues like the Marquee in London and to the UK's festival heartland.

It was during this period that Flint's penchant for the theatrical first emerged as the long-haired dancer started to come onstage wrapped in chains, or in a giant hamster ball. His performance veered between the extremes of rave's *jouissance* and punk's menace. However, it was only when Flint sang, snarled and spat his way through 1996 track 'Firestarter' that a public image of electronic punk was created for the band. Flint looked better in photos, posed better in videos and gave better quotes in interviews. As far as the media was concerned Flinty was the main man. Howlett, Maxim and Thornhill simply bit players. Into the shifting axis of the band's public dynamics the Prodigy released *The Fat of the Land* in 1997. In its first week of

release alone it went to #1 in 23 countries, accumulated sales that were greater than all of the sales of all of the other albums in the top 200 combined, outsold the #2 album, Radiohead's *OK Computer* by a breathtaking 8 to 1 and outperformed the Spice Girls and Oasis at the height of their US successes (James, 2018).

Inevitably the media spotlight rested on Flint and even more inevitably the rest of the band didn't like it. So what followed was a seven-year period in which Flint attempted to steal the limelight, grab the mic and force the Prodigy further down the punk route. Maxim went into a very public battle to keep hold of the mic, jostle for the limelight with Flint and push the music in any direction, just as long as he was involved. Finally, the second dancer, Leeroy Thornhill, simply split. He couldn't handle the friction.

When Keith formed a punk band called FLINT and signed to major label Interscope, Howlett's battle with the singer became very public. Howlett was increasingly trapped by the media's obsession with a dancer-turned-vocalist as band leader, and also a growing desire among his vocalists to take central roles in defining musical directions. Furthermore, his label XL Recordings had already plotted their financial future against a repeat of *Fat of the Land's* commercial appeal. Musically, this suffocating situation resulted in 2002's single 'Baby's Got a Temper' – aka The Prodigy covering a FLINT track ('NNNN') as parody of themselves.

There is something very fitting about the fact that two Keith Flint vocal tracks took The Prodigy into the mainstream and then ultimately all but destroyed them. Taken

as individual lyrical performances they captured the essence of Keith's personality and showcased the start of a personal collapse. On 'Firestarter' *he is extreme, aggressive, belligerent, single-minded, in control*. By 'Baby's Got a Temper' he is out of control, self-destructive, relying on Rohypnol 'just to get it on'. An autobiographical song about a friendship with two minor Royals it captured the man on the edge of collapse. The years that 'Firestarter' and 'Baby's Got a Temper' bookended was an intense period that saw them enjoying a Glastonbury take over and the euphoria of the Brixton Academy all-nighters, 130,000 people at Knebworth and claustrophobic madness at Brighton Essential Festival. Conquering the United States and playing everywhere and anywhere that bands didn't usually like to play. A stone throwing riot in Greece and mid-summer snowboarding festival in Spain. Dodging bullets and electrocution in Beirut and spitting fury to 200,000 fans in Moscow's Red Square. By 2002 the band were a train wreck. Flint was on his way to becoming dependent on alcohol and drugs.

Neither Keith Flint nor Maxim Reality were anywhere to be heard on the 2004 comeback album *Always Outnumbered Never Outgunned*. Liam had seemingly dispensed of their service as recording artists and only enrolled them as members of the live band. A compilation album *Their Law: The Singles 1990 – 2005* wisely omitted 'Baby's Got a Temper' and forced the band to reconsider their futures. They were by then without a label having been dropped by XL.

Since then they have continued to enjoy global success. The 2009 album *Invaders Must Die* on Cooking Vinyl presented the band as a self-sufficient fighting unit. The

self-curated Warriors Dance festivals in Tokyo, Milton Keynes and Belgrade brought an entire new generation of audience to the gigs. A crowd built in the image of Keith Flint. Any rave hangover of bon homie had long gone; in its place was a tattooed up, testosterone fuelled, adenalized rush of violent intent. These fans called themselves the Prodigy Warriors and they revelled in what they perceived as the band's outsider status and would travel the globe to see them. By the release of *The Day is My Enemy* in 2015 the motif of 'us versus them' sat at the core of the band's ideology. Last year's seventh number 1 album *No Tourists* saw no let up in the Prodigy's anger, however unlike its two predecessors Keith Flint's vocals were barely present.

Beside his recordings with the Prodigy and Flint he also formed short-lived old-school rave act Clever Brains Frying in 2004 and supplied vocals to dubstep producer Caspa's 'War' single in 2012. However, Flint's obsessions increasingly seemed to sit outside either the band or music. He kept fit by boxing, practising jiu-jitsu and marathon running. He was an enthusiastic motorcyclist who rode 1500 miles across Europe to attend the Spanish motorcycle grand prix in Jerez in 2007. He created Team Traction Control, his own motorcycle team that raced in the British Supersport Championship. He was also a keen horse rider. He even bought a pub The Leather Bottle in the village of Pleshey.

So, what was he like? A mass of contradictions. He was the rabble rousing party starter, who preferred to spend time with his horses and dogs than with people. He was the petrolhead who burned rubber through the Essex countryside while also building a sustainable eco village near his country home. He was the entertainer who

'gave good quote' and knew how to perform on and offstage for the media, but enjoyed by far architectural design and renovation over the music circus.

In many ways Flint's public persona was not unlike Iggy Pop's. In interview you never know whether you are going to get the brash but sharp Iggy or the deeply contemplative James Osterberg. The same was true of Flint, either Keith the conversationalist, or Keef the Firestarter. Unlike Mr Pop though, not many media people were interested in the Keith conversation, they just wanted Keef the rabble-rouser.

I last spoke with Keith just before Christmas 2018. We talked about getting older and growing into our old-age selves. He told me it took him three days to get over every gig now, and with a world tour coming into view he needed to get fit or it would kill him. It would be wrong to read too much into that statement, but as a man who lived for the excitement of doing what he wanted when he wanted to do it, it was clear that being tethered to the Prodigy touring machine for the next 18 months at least represented a physical challenge to him.

Keith's funeral service on Friday 29 March saw fans from all over the world descended on Bocking village to pay their respects and party hard. In the church band and crew shared stories of his contradictory nature. This was brought to the fore at the end of the service as the same friends carried Keith's coffin out to the tune of 'Message to You Rudy'. Smiles spread around the church and heads started to bob to the song's infectious beat. You could just imagine Keith's grinning face

watching the absurdity of tears, smiles and bobbing heads. Even in his death he could get people dancing.

References

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