

Pete Tong Biography

For Pete Tong's consummate involvement in all areas of dance music has made him a genuine household name in the UK. As a DJ, Tong is enjoying increasing international popularity, especially in the USA. He has also launched a successful Friday night residency at Pacha in Ibiza this summer and as a broadcaster he has brought dance to the masses via his Essential Selection show at Radio One (he has recently agreed a new contract which will keep him on the BBC airwaves through to 2005).

Last year he finally gave up his day job and left his seminal ffr label which he founded in 1988 where he was responsible for the careers of Orbital, Goldie, Brand New Heavies, Salt n Pepa and Artful Dodger to name a few and for the first time is concentrating one hundred percent on Pete Tong, the DJ.

Pete Tong is also the DJ behind many an Essential Mix compilation, and also assembled the music for the hit film 24 Hour Party People.

Such a range of high-profile activities seems a long way removed from Tong's beginnings as a wedding DJ in Kent during his teens. But for all his current fame and acclaim, you'd be hard put to find someone whose progression has been more organic. In fact, in many ways, Pete's story runs parallel to the growth of dance music in the UK.

When he was at school, hard rock ruled the roost, and Pete tried playing in bands, but after seeing a DJ playing actual records at a school disco and deciding "that looked like much more fun," he never looked back. "DJ'ing just seemed to be my vocation" says Pete.

Initially, he followed that vocation to Soul Weekenders in otherwise quiet sea-side towns like Caistor and Prestatyn, where he "was always the young boy" who ran with a crowd of old-school DJs known as the Soul Funk Mafia. This led to a job at Blues & Soul magazine where he soon became features editor and began making appearances on BBC station Radio London and Radio Medway.

Out in club land, meanwhile, he quickly learned a maxim that still holds true today: "the only way to do it is to run your own club, create your own scene." So Tong DJ'd at a club in Baker Street called [Family] Function, and simultaneously booked bands for a weekend alternative night: the first one he hired was the then-unknown Culture Club. An ability to explain what was then considered a fringe genre found him presenting a dance music segment on Radio 1's Peter Powell show. But noticing that daytime DJs had no control over the music they played, Tong eschewed national radio opportunities, launching a soul show on Kent's newly-launched Invicta station instead. By this time, his growing reputation for recognising new talent saw him leave Blues and Soul for an A&R position at London Records, a job held, in one manner or another, for almost twenty years.

In the mid-eighties, the old guard was swept away, as first the hip-hop and electro sounds from New York, and then house music from Chicago, techno from Detroit and

the 'Balearic Beat' in Ibiza, were embraced by a new set of young London promoters and DJs. Pete Tong and his friend Nicky Holloway DJ'd in Ibiza for the first time in 1986. The following year Holloway went with Oakenfold and Danny Rampling, and upon return to London, succeeded in emulating the Ibiza experience across clubland. The house generation was born.

Tong, in the thick of it all, was hired by Capital Radio to broadcast to the new clubbers, which helped give him the clout to start a 'label within a label' at London. Ffrr Records was born in 1988: hitting the charts immediately with Salt n Pepa's 'Push It', Tong and ffrr became famous for conducting lightning raids on the latest underground hits and propelling them up the charts. "I've been lucky," says Tong. "I grew up at a time when the whole scene exploded, and I worked with a bunch of people for a long period of time who empowered me to be able to change things."

The biggest change came in 1991, when Radio One recognised that it needed to cater for the new, and permanent, youth culture. Pete was hired away from Capital to host a brand new Friday evening show, the Essential Selection, which gave him one of the most influential jobs in the business - broadcasting to the nation's record buying, club-going youth and, unlike his daytime predecessors, choosing the music too.

Tong's success as a broadcaster, clubland DJ and A&R man has been predicated on a precarious but successful balance between credibility - "I look for originality and records with a lot of spirit and soul," - and commerciality. "You can have good taste in your own world and be very obscure," he says of those DJs who ignore the crowd. This means that he's not afraid to drop the hits onto the decks. "People forget it's entertainment," Tong explains. "You've got these DJs coming on, and they'll inflict two or three hours of music on the audience, and sometimes it's torture because it's all unknown. It doesn't really work, and the music they're picking isn't really that good anyway. It's supposed to be fun."

This readiness to entertain, tempered by a constant search for the next big thing, enabled Tong to thrive throughout the 1990s. Ffrr grew from a singles-based label to an album artist's breeding ground. The Essential Selection spun off a show called the Essential Mix, enabling DJs worldwide to showcase their mixing talents on national radio, and together these led to the Essential compilations, with Tong producing several best-sellers himself. In the mid-nineties, Radio 1 sought Tong's advice on revamping their roster, and with the arrival of Judge Jules, and co. to the national airwaves, the revolution was complete.