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# the real party monster

an exclusive interview with the club kid killer

Michael Alig was a naïve suburban gay boy who arrived in New York in the early '80s with a dream and a smile. He turned the city's nightlife on its head through some of its headiest days – but found true fame when his life unraveled in a bloody mix of drugs and murder.

In the feature film, *Party Monster*, Macaulay Culkin stars as Michael Alig, New York's infamous "Club Kid Killer".

The real Michael Alig, however, is currently imprisoned in the Attica Correctional Facility in upstate New York. Melbourne journalist Danny Corvini has been corresponding with Alig for the last two years. Based on their letters, he compiled this feature for DNA.

FEATURE DANNY CORVINI PHOTOGRAPHY JOHN VALENTINO

"When I arrived in New York, I knew I wanted to live there," says Michael Alig. "It was so unlike anything I'd ever experienced. The people were all so tolerant and creative. Here, people seemed to be praised and celebrated for their individuality rather than made fun of for it."

Michael grew up in the Mid-Western town of South Bend, Indiana with his German mother Elke and older brother David. He was regarded as a cute but ordinary boy. At school, his offbeat sense of humour made him popular with some of the students but also made him the target of harassment by others.

"I knew I had to get out of Indiana, that I'd never be able to lead a happy life, always having to hide or cover what I was," he writes. "As a child I was always miserable with the fact I was gay – not because I felt like there was anything wrong with being gay but because I felt different to the other kids, which forced me to try and figure out how and why I was different."

As his sexuality emerged in his teen years, Michael was bullied. He and his brother were also taunted as "nigger lovers" when their mother dated a black man.

"It was like a Jerry Springer episode," he jokes.

Michael's first gay experience happened >>



(Opposite) Michael Alig in his prime, 1992. (Above) James St James: he survived and wrote the first book.

>> in a shopping mall toilet when he was just 14 after noticing that older men were looking at him "in a funny way". He was broken hearted when he lost the man's phone number, "My only contact with the gay world."

At 17 he enrolled at Fordham University in New York to study architecture but he quickly changed to a fashion college after seeing a magazine spread featuring Melbourne performance artist Leigh Bowery.

"I couldn't believe my eyes. He didn't even seem human!" gushes Michael. "The first thing I did when I arrived in NYC was look for Greenwich Village, the place I'd heard so much about. It seemed like an almost mythical place to me; a place where everyone could be themselves no matter what 'themselves' was. I could hardly believe such a place existed."

Michael became enamoured of New York's nightlife scene which, at that time, was still bubbling away to the beat of Andy Warhol's Factory.

"I was inspired by the Old Guard: Andy Warhol, Michael Musto, Rudolf, Diane Brill, Sister Dimension, John Sex – these people seemed magical to me. Like some sort of crazy character actors who were always in character, living life the way I'd always wanted to, like it was some kind of game."

"Early on I met Keith Haring because my best friend from school, a porn star named Ludovic, was dating him. Warhol was a huge influence. But he was almost too famous. I never thought what I was starting would ever become a scene in itself. I was just hoping to be accepted by the existing scene. The thought of replacing that scene never even crossed my mind."

Michael had more gay sex when he got to New York, first up with a homeboy he met in the subway. But again the experience left him feeling empty when the boy never called him. He fell in love for real when he met the El Salvador-born Keoki. Now known as Superstar DJ Keoki on the party circuit, Keoki would play a starring role in Michael's career as nightlife empresario. In an interview in a 1997 docudrama on Michael, Keoki said:

"I met Michael on my first night out in New York City. The only person who approached me that night was Michael with a drink ticket. We took a cab to the Bronx, he opened the [cab] door out the front of his house and said, 'Get out! Run!' He grabbed me and we ran, darted around a corner into this alley way and we started kissing!"

Michael and Keoki both worked at Danceteria as busboys. Michael was obsessed with the idea of putting on parties with Keoki as his DJ. At the time, the late '80s, the acid house craze was the hottest underground movement in Britain but in New York things were still stuck in the past.

"The Old Guard were all still into house and

disco," moans Michael. So he insisted that Keoki play acid house. "I felt that this was the next thing, the thing that'd differentiate us, make us stand out," he says. "Of course, Keoki was the only DJ in NYC playing it. It cleared the dance floor at first and he wanted to stop playing it but I wouldn't let him. I knew

a bit from him," admits Michael.

Others say James St James and Michael Musto were the first real Club Kids. DJ/promoter Larry Tee, who wrote RuPaul's hit single Supermodel (You Better Work) and more recently coined the term electroclash, also promoted clubs with Michael.

**"Michael was inspired by James' kiddie drag style. James was a serious drug addict who only hung around Michael because he was a tremendous source."**

it would catch on eventually. We just had to let it build, let it develop."

Keoki and Michael took a while to get their act together. "He wasn't a very good DJ at first," writes Michael. "Couldn't mix. Had no records. But he was cute and had a 'name' and personality which, at the time, few other DJs had."

"I believe James and Michael Musto were the first two, that I saw, who used the Club Kid attitude of 'give me drinks because I am fabulous'. Michael Alig was tremendously inspired by James' kiddie drag style. James, though, was a serious drug addict and only hung around Michael because Michael was a tremendous source."



(Above) Club Kids Sebastian Jr and Julius Teaser at Limelight, 1992. (Opposite, top) Michael Alig surrounded by Club Kids outside The Palladium, 1992. (Centre) Michael Alig at Club USA and (below) Club Kids.

As the scene Michael was creating developed, Keoki also evolved musically through the times, whether it was drag or techno and rave. "We just kept changing, embodying whatever was coming out of clubland at the time," he says.

Michael started his scene with equal parts charm and hard work. He learnt the ropes from some of New York's finest – one of the most influential being James St James, a 'celebutante' who was a surviving drag queen/fabulous nobody of the Warhol era.

James was well connected in New York nightlife, hanging out with the likes of Village Voice columnist Michael Musto and other Old Guard celebrities. "James was an early influence on the Club Kids. He was one of the first club celebs I met in New York and I did glean

Of James' friendship with Michael Alig, Village Voice columnist Michael Musto wrote: "I always thought it was weird since I thought James was more sophisticated than that. He was one of my best friends before jumping on the Club Kid thing and he'd been a celebante with a lot of wit and smarts."

Musto describes his first impressions of the young Michael as "aggressive, fresh faced and in your face. Someone without a lot of guile, who would go after what he wanted and get it."

But there was always a strange dynamic between Michael and James. "It's strange with him, this love/hate thing," writes Michael. "I suppose on some level I knew when I first met him that we should or would become friends. There aren't a lot of people like he



and I – when we find others like us we just naturally gravitate towards each other. Part of the hatred – on both sides – was jealousy. I was jealous of James' status in clubland and he was jealous of my youthful good looks and sexy boyfriends!"

"We were all absolutely horrified by this little monster who had just come out of nowhere and was intent on taking our scene away from us," James said in 1997.

There may have been a lot of jealousy and even hate between the two, but there was also a lot of love and a kinetic energy that would sometimes veer towards the brilliant.

With his network firmly in place, Michael started pounding the pavements, really working hard to become the party promoter he knew he should be. He handed out fliers and complimentary passes to good-looking kids or anyone else that could pull off a fabulous outfit that would get noticed. He was given his first opportunity to promote at Danceteria at just 17, but his first attempt was too cheesy to cut it in the competitive club world of New York City. But Michael persisted and Danceteria owner Rudolf continued giving him chances. Soon enough, Michael did succeed and attracted a heady mix of freaks and faggots, fashionistas and artists. His parties started overshadowing those of the glamorous Old Guard scene who were still reeling from the death of Warhol and The Factory.

By the age of 21, Michael's parties were now the hottest tickets in town and he was a force to be reckoned with. He was fast becoming rich too. When Rudolf opened a new club under the Westside Highway called The Tunnel, which held 3,500 punters, Michael could earn up to \$US8,000 a night. It was then that Michael's scene finally earned its own name: The Club Kids.

In 1989, Rudolf sold The Tunnel and opened a new venue, turning Michael off in the process by attempting to attract a more suburban crowd. So Michael and the Club Kids packed up and moved to Limelight, a decommissioned church at 6th Ave and 20th St, where Michael found a new mentor, club owner Peter Gatien. In 1990, Peter bought The Tunnel from Rudolf, giving the Club Kids back their old home and Michael's official Club Kid night Disco 2000 was born. It ran for a phenomenal six years.

The Club Kid look was part cyber-glam, part trash and part cartoonish caricature. Michael himself borrowed heavily from Leigh Bowery by wearing blue dots sprinkled all over his face. A cultish inner circle of Club Kids was formed, and these elite and highly experimental kids became the new nightlife celebrities as the Old Guard well and truly lost their place on the dial.

It seemed that around this time Michael Alig had everything. He was appearing on >>

>> talk shows and in magazine features, and not only had a career which was the envy of nightclub figures the world over, but had a cute and successful DJ boyfriend to boot. But Michael paints a realistic picture of how he and Keoki related, saying "We were both selfish, stubborn, self-centred, and young. Neither of us knew how to love anyone in a healthy, non co-dependant way. It was pretty sad and pathetic, actually. I mean, we both loved each other deeply and passionately, but we were each so wrapped up in what we wanted."

Now having achieved his dreams of establishing Disco 2000, Michael was ready to start doing things that would really make his blood flow. He started promoting the Outlaw Parties, where the Club Kids would rock up at a public place like a subway platform, a bridge or even the Burger King in Times Square, and just start partying. The Outlaws wouldn't even last an hour before they were broken up by police, but the cops were nearly always laughing and it was great publicity for Michael.

"My favourite party would have to be one of the Outlaws," he writes. "Those were always the most 'real' parties because we didn't have to worry about drawing a crowd or making a club happy. We played our own music and we did it on our own terms. For us, Outlaw parties were a way to thumb our nose at the more established clubs and say 'we don't need you'. One of my favourite Outlaws was held once a month in an abandoned boathouse on the Hudson River where you had to crawl through a hole in the wall to get to it. We'd set up a bar, a thousand candles in glasses, music... everyone dressed elegantly and crawling into an abandoned building. I loved that dichotomy: crumbling buildings/elegance."

Disco 2000 was attracting celebrities like RuPaul, Deee-Lite and Madonna, but Michael was unimpressed with the A-grade stars like the former Material Girl who was at the time having a clubland hit with *Vogue*. "Disco 2000 was never really about celebrities," he explains. "We'd rather have someone like Ann B Davis who played Alice on *The Brady Bunch* than a big star like Alec Baldwin. There had to be something campy, special or notorious for them to be feted at Disco 2000."

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The parties became more twisted as the '90s crept on, with Michael's bizarre and ego-centric ways becoming unwired once he joined the masses and got on the designer drug craze in '92/'93. He once peed in a drink and gave it to a drag queen when he knew he had hepatitis. On another occasion, he peed off a balcony onto a bar tender, and she was



(Top) Sacred at Limelight in 1992. (Above) Walt Paper (blond boy) at Club USA, 1992.

the one who got fired, such was his influence.

By 1994, Michael and the Club Kids had added ketamine to their list of party favours, which also included rohypnol, ecstasy, crack, cocaine and heroin. It was the beginning of the end for Disco 2000 and the beginning of the beginning of everyone's multiple drug addictions. By 1995 the vibe had well and truly

changed and the fabulousness associated with Disco 2000 was replaced with a harder, more nihilistic atmosphere.

Michael celebrated his 30th birthday by throwing a party called *Blood Feast*. The poster artwork featured him lying dead while a Club Kid, armed with a hammer, ate his brain. It may have been humour of a sort, par-

ticularly as it was influenced by his favourite childhood horror movie, but it was also a prophetic sign of his ultimate sin to come.

Angel Melendez and Robert 'Freeze' Riggs were two drug dealers who came to Disco 2000 for the amazing atmosphere, the non-judgmental crowd and, of course, the amazing sales they could make. Freeze was a blow-in from Florida who sported a goatee and a leather body-pouch with a compartment for each drug. Angel was a Columbian-born filmmaker/actor who wore a set of wings like the angel Pygar in the sci-fi classic, *Barbarella*.

Michael blames heroin for his story's sorry ending. "It was my - and lots of my friends' - downfall, ultimately," he says. "I feel like I've lead people down the wrong path. I mean people have their own wills and everything, but the Club Kids really were role models and we didn't always set the best example!"

In 1996, with a \$20,000 debt to Angel and with his club faltering, Michael was in a danger-



(Left to right) Macaulay Culkin as Michael Alig, Chloe Sevigny as Gitsie and the cast of Club Kids from the movie *Party Monster*.

ous situation. "I actually think part of his decline came about when he realised the Club Kid scene was peaking and he freaked and became more desperate," writes Michael Musto.

Angel came over to Michael's house to confront him about the money and when the argument escalated into a stoush, Michael called out to his roommate Freeze to help. Freeze found Angel shaking Michael so he grabbed a hammer from the cupboard and hit Angel over the head. Angel, who was still conscious, grabbed the hammer momentarily from Freeze but Freeze grabbed it back, giving him another two blows. Now completely manic, Michael started strangling Angel and smothered his face with a pillow. Freeze told Michael to stop and pushed him off Angel. Freeze then left the room but when he returned he found Michael pouring drain cleaner down Angel's throat and taping his mouth shut.

Angel's body was left in their bathtub for seven days before it was cut into pieces and disposed of in various rubbish bins and in boxes thrown into the Hudson River. Michael and Freeze weren't arrested for another 10 months despite rumours floating around that they were responsible for Angel's disappearance. Freeze confessed and in early 1997 they were each sentenced to 10 to 20 years for manslaughter.

Now 37 and spending his days in a correctional facility in upstate New York, Michael has had plenty of time to reflect over his downfall. The drugs, predictably, are a sore point. "When I reached my rock bottom, I was living in a friend's living room, jobless, homeless, a junkie, and it depressed me so much," he says. "I felt I had to continue getting high in order to escape from that realisation. It was as though I'd fallen so hard, or was falling so

quickly that I just decided the easiest thing to do would be to let myself fall."

When Michael was originally imprisoned, he behaved like most drug addicts; he made stupid comments and was unaware of the consequences of his crime.

"I didn't feel 'normal' for months after being sober, maybe even years," he says of the drugs' slow wear-off effect. "And it was a gradual thing, not a sudden jolt. I began to notice small things: emotions, physical feeling, smell, returning to me over time. But it took almost two years."

Although the drugs have now left his sys-

**"We were arguing over an outfit. It wasn't the wild blood-fest people think it was." (Michael poured drain cleaner down Angel's throat and taped his mouth shut.)**

tem, Michael still has some difficulties dealing with reality. He (perhaps deliberately) paints a warped version of what happened to Angel and why.

"Let's face it, if we hadn't been so high the whole fight wouldn't have happened in the first place," he reasons. "We were arguing about an outfit! I mean, come on! This is not something sober adults would've allowed to escalate into what it did. I think unless you were there, though, at the time, and could've seen and understood the way it all came about, it's wrong for people to make judgements and say, 'Well, I think they should've done it this way or that way.' When you're high and something like that just happens suddenly and you're not expecting it, you don't know how to react, what to do. It wasn't this manic, wild blood-fest people think it was. It just wasn't like that at all."

Michael has lost some of his closest friends, including James, who still occasionally writes to him but excluded Michael from the whole

*Party Monster* film writing process. Keoki has distanced himself and is now living in the Bronx with another boyfriend and has a successful DJing and recording career. He hasn't contacted Michael in a year and a half. Various Club Kids and friends of Michael's have died, such as Gitsie, played by Chloe Sevigny in *Party Monster*, who overdosed the day before she was due to testify.

"Almost every month I hear word of another friend whose died of an overdose. It's a tragedy," he writes sadly. However, James and Keoki were photographed together at the *Party Monster* premiere in the USA, looking

very much like the eternal Club Kids.

In some sense, life and love goes on, even for Michael, who has a very different future ahead of him once he's released.

"When I was at another facility I met a boy named Mike who I fell deeply in love with," he says optimistically. "I'd watch him in the mess hall and think to myself, 'if only I could meet someone like that, then I wouldn't even mind being in jail!' And a few days later we became friends and had a beautiful affair. He's in another facility now, but he gets out around the same time I do and says he wants to live with me when he gets out."

Michael's also writing a book - which he hopes will offset James' *Party Monster*. But no matter what, he can't change what happened. All he can do is try to redeem himself.

"Sometimes I just lie here in bed and cry. Or worry about the future. How things will be. >> >> Ever since that day I've had this horrible lump in my stomach that hasn't gone away.

Whatever I'm doing – reading, exercising, listening to the radio, whatever – it's there as a constant reminder. Whenever I think I'm slipping too far away or feeling sorry for myself, I think of Angel and his family. And then I don't feel quite as bad. I feel rather lucky to be alive, actually."

Michael also complains in many of his letters about a growing numbness in his groin, which over the course of our contact has been constantly dismissed by homophobic doctors who refuse to see him, and refuse to let him see an outside specialist. One doctor at his current facility told him to "live with it". He had hoped that he would receive the proper attention at this facility when he was transferred last year, but it seems no one is willing to take it seriously.

"I'm pretty down about my condition," he says. "I'm afraid that what's wrong with me may be serious or permanent."

The chances are high that Michael is suffering from an untreated sexually transmitted disease, caused by unprotected prison sex. Village Voice writer Frank Owen claims in his new book *Clubland Confidential* that Michael was raped by "gangbangers" as soon as he was incarcerated in 1997 and that he was also raped numerous times later by a member of the Islamic street sect the Five Percent Nation.

Michael's close friend Patrick Boyd gives an account of visiting him recently: "His main traumatic problem is that he's losing feeling in his penis and it's spreading to his inner thighs," he says. "Michael's got a pinched nerve in his spine maybe or some strange disease. But they don't know yet because the prison doctors won't give him proper medical attention. It's kinda made him angry and bitter. I'm afraid he's going to get out and torture and mutilate teenage boys," he jokes, adding: "I kid, I kid, uhh kinda..."

"Reality has sunken in since I've been here," admits Michael. "Boy, has it ever!"

And what does he miss most about outside life? "Human contact, intelligent conversations, hugs from friends. Food! Touching other people without fear of being misunderstood, romance. And, of course, I miss making an entrance!" 🍌

The photographs of Michael Alig and The Club Kids in this feature are courtesy of John Valentino. See more of his work at [www.johnvalentino.com](http://www.johnvalentino.com)

Danny Corvini is a freelance writer based in Melbourne. Read more of his work at [www.raydar.com.au](http://www.raydar.com.au)

Party Monster will be released nationally in Australian cinemas later this year through Dendy.

(Right) Macaulay Culkin as Michael Alig, Wilson Cruz as Angel and Seth Green as James St James in *Party Monster*. (Top) Club Kids from the movie.

