

Name: Chris Kemp
Date of Birth: 1958
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Duration: 00:27:39

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11th November 2017. Chris Kemp and my birth date is the 8th December, 1958.

Hi Chris. Can you tell us when you came to Milton Keynes?

Well, I came to Milton Keynes almost thirty years ago. It's quite a strange story because I'd lived most of my life in the north-east of England and I came south to Oxford for a job and, during that time, in the early eighties, I had somebody come through my door and ask me if I'd put a band on at my venue – it was a big sports centre – and the guy was the manager of Dr. Feelgood and I said, "Oh, that's too expensive; too expensive. Fifteen hundred pounds; we've never paid anything like that."

He said, "You will sell out; you will make a fortune."

So, it actually...on the night it came; we made an absolute fortune and I got a real thirst for putting on bands. So what happened then was, I saw a gig in Milton Keynes, which was The Fall, live at Woughton Centre – and I loved The Fall at the time. I thought, 'I'll take my girlfriend across; we'll go and watch the band and, you know, have a really good night,' And I always remember, as I drove down the H7 – which I didn't know it was the H7 at the time – on the right hand side, just under the bridge was a little Citroen C5, burnt out, on the top of the redway and Woughton Centre's turn was the first left. So I went into Woughton, went into the gig and I got talking to one of the guys there. It's really weird because you couldn't hear anything in the hall because there were no curtains, it was just like a shed – just brick walls – and the sound was going like this, which meant that you could just hear a buzz rather than any sound at all, so the sound was really bad. So I went out and I started talking to one of the guys there and he said, "Oh," he said, "there's a job going here," he said. "Mike Payton's just left the job and they're looking for an arts manager." So he said, "I'll let you have a form; take it away." So I took the form away; I applied; went for the interview – saw the little C5 on the side again – and got the job. So that's how I ended up in Milton Keynes.

You've just tempted me now. What was the C5...what was the story about that being burnt out then? Did that give you an impression of Milton Keynes at the time?

No, the C5 is really important because that's the only way I could find my way to work. Because, not knowing Milton Keynes, I knew that when I saw the C5 I knew where work was, so I used to turn off there.

So tell us about your initial other impressions of Milton Keynes, apart from the burnt out car.

Well, it's quite interesting coming to Milton Keynes because it's completely different to anywhere you've ever been to. It reminded me a lot of American cities and very easy to find your way about because it's all H and V so, wherever you are, you know where you are because of the grid road system. And the thing about Milton Keynes, when I first came, was the community. So I immediately fitted in to the Woughton community and it was kind of a...it's a vocation more than it is a job, when you're doing kind of music and the arts, because we did all sorts of things with the Royal Shakespeare Company, we did a lot of dance companies, all those kind of things, and the kind of community around that was fantastic; and also, because it was right in the middle of an estate on Leadenhall, it meant that lots of people from that estate came, we had Sunday bands on, we had all sorts. So it was kind of like your job, your hobby and it just kind of sprung from there and it was a really brilliant community. I met lots of great people when I first got there and we did lots of things as well, which was great.

So if we can go on then, with your involvement in The Pitz, so what you did and...

Well, The Pitz was an interesting concept because I remember the night we decided on the name and that we would do it, I was with Clive and Dylan, who were then from Pen and Ink Graphics, Lee Scriven, Mark from The Courtyard, in the bar at Woughton and Mike [Payton?] was at the bar and we were trying to decide what we'd call a club where we'd have local bands on and we could tour that club around different clubs in the area; and I wanted to call it The Bunker but the biggest problem with that was that that had Nazi connotations and we just couldn't think of another name. And then Mark, from The Courtyard Theatre, says...he said, "Well, this place is the pits." And so it stuck and that's why we called it The Pitz.

Clive and Dylan designed, printed all of the stuff, so we had a logo from that and we started our first gig in 1987 and the bands on

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that night were The New Mutants and Clare. I always remember that night because we thought nobody would come but I think we had a hundred and seventy people came to the first gig, which was good for a local band night. And it was fantastic because we had a big banner at the back with The Pitz on, we had a professional photographer came in and took photographs. But I think the great thing about it was that, when the first band came on, who were called Clare, nobody had ever seen them before and they were just a local band and we'd sent out for tapes and they'd sent one; it sounded really interesting. They came on stage and they had a lot of anvils and tin cans and things that they hit with hammers and sticks. So they had a really, really industrial sound, so it was very different. And that's kind of how The Pitz started to get its name, through doing different things.

And then The New Mutants at the time, along with the Blues Collective, were one of the three biggest bands in Milton Keynes and lots of people, their friends, their families, had come to see them and that was the thing about the community. So then we moved it to the Counterpoint in Bletchley for a night; we moved it to another nightclub in Bletchley; we did The Courtyard Theatre.

After a couple of months, though, the funding that Mike Payton had given us started to run out so we thought, 'We've got to do something here to make it work.' So I started looking for major bands and the first major band that we had was Balaam and the Angels; and the day that they came we'd sold three hundred tickets, which was pretty good going. And so we then put a lot of local bands on with major bands, which gave the local bands a real step up and, you know, a chance to play with some of the bigger bands.

And the second band that we had was the real breakthrough because that was Pop Will Eat Itself and at that band, that sold out and it was in the NME and there was all sorts of publicity; and the band that played with them, a local band, had a fantastic time and it just went on from there.

And I think, with The Pitz, it started off very much kind of Indie but it was very difficult to make ends meet when you were just doing Indie bands. So we started to kind of balance the Indie acts with rock acts. Of course it was the new wave of British heavy metal started then, or the second new wave – or maybe the third new wave...*[laughs]* – of British heavy metal had started and we got a lot of bands from Birmingham in, like Marshall Law, and we started to get three or four hundred people coming to the five hundred venue. And then, for many of those bands, that then escalated and we put them in the main hall. And during that time we had a number of main bands in that hall.

Probably one of the biggest gigs that we had at that time was Blues Collective when they did the Brothers' Reunion gig on New Year's Eve, which was completely sold out and I think, rather than the thousand people that were supposed to be in, I think we probably had about fifteen hundred but nobody was counting at the time.

But I think the biggest breakthrough for The Pitz was thrash metal because we were the only...one of the only venues in the UK that was putting thrash metal on and people were coming from all over Europe to see bands at The Pitz: I was getting letters from Austria, letters from Norway and Sweden, saying, "Fantastic gig, we love it." And so we went through all of this development, putting a barrier in and all these kind of things, to facilitate that.

The first gig that we ever put on, that was thrash metal, was a band called Exodus and this band were from America; they were huge; it was sold out; and off they went onto the stage. And I could see people coming out with their hands over their noses, blood pouring down their face. I thought, 'What's going on?' And what it was, people were diving off the stage onto the floor, smacking their heads, going back in again, all coming out...we thought, 'We'll have to do something about this.' So eventually we became the first venue – small venue – that bought a barrier. So we brought in a big barrier from a guy called Robbie Wilson and this was supposed to separate the crowd from the stage and stop them getting onto the stage. But actually, the first gig we put in, a guy jumped off the stage onto the barrier and broke both of his thighs. And that was a really big gig, so we thought, 'Oh, what are we going to do here?'

So the next band that came there was a band called Exodus and...[unintelligible]...(Have I got that wrong, to say Exodus? I did, didn't I? Sorry. I'll go back one.) The next band that came there were a band called Nuclear Assault and they were an absolutely huge band; and the beauty of being in Milton Keynes was that we started to get the bigger bands because we were midway between London and Birmingham. So, either at the start of a tour or at the end of a tour, we'd have a huge band and it was just fantastic. People would ring us up with bands like Gun; bands like Iron Maiden, which was the biggest band we ever put on; Nuclear Assault, who walked into the venue and said, "We're not playing here; it's too small," as soon as they came through the venue door. And our lighting guy then, Dave Brightman, put his head out the window and he said, "You'd better wait, mate," he said, "because, if you play here, you'll never want to play anywhere else." And at the end of the night the lead singer came up to me outside and he said, "Greatest gig we've ever played." And that sort of showed you what it was.

I think the metal and the thrash was a real turning point because we still had big Indie bands as well – Happy Mondays – we still had all of the local gigs – we did ten-band local gigs – as well as this and it was really kind of drawing the two together to give a...to even out the possible chances of people playing at the venue with bigger bands, as well as having great local band nights where lots of people came, and we were trying to attract new audiences and bringing new bands in, to make sure that the bands in Milton Keynes had somewhere to play. But it was that development of those bigger bands that really made it happen.

And then one day I got a phone call from John Jackson from Fair Warning and he rang me up and he said, "Look Chris," he said...he said, "How would you like to put the Holy Smokers on?" And I said, "Holy Smokers? I've never heard of them."

He says, "It's Iron Maiden." He said, "They're coming back from Brazil; they've played to two hundred and fifty thousand people in Brazil." He said, "We want one date before we do our British tour. Are you up for it?"

I said, "Yeah, of course I'm up for it."

He said, "Right, two things: it'll only cost you fifteen hundred quid," he said, "you won't make any money out of it, but the second thing is you can't announce it till the morning of the gig."

So I said, "I can't say anything?"

He said, "No."

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So I didn't tell anybody – just said we'd got this gig on – and on the morning of the gig it sold out in ten minutes. And it was amazing day. We had five Pantechnicons came in and they started to unload into the back and I went in there and I said, "You can't put another front on the stage; if they put another set on the stage we're going to lose two hundred people. So I sat with the tour manager, the production manager and the agent – 'cause the agent came down as well – and said, "Look, what are we going to do?" And they just worked it out and put it up. We even had Eddie on stage as well and it was just a night to remember for everybody – and they made a video of it for MTV. So that's what started to happen. We then had Radio 1 came down, they did the Blue Aeroplanes and a couple of other gigs and it was just kind of spiralling from there.

Funnily enough, during that period, I had a couple of bands, like the Sea Hags, who...it was the only tour they ever did of the UK and their lead singer died just after they finished the tour, so it was only one tour, and people remember that gig because they saw a fantastic band who unfortunately were never to form again. But on the night of the Sea Hags I got a knock on my door and Rod MacSween from one of the agencies had come to see me and he sat in the office, he said, "Look," he said, "I've got a job for you." He said, "How would you like to be Pearl Jam's manager?"

I said, "What, man..?"

He says, "No, tour manager," he said. "Not manager, tour manager."

So I said, "I'm not sure."

He said...

I said, "What will I be doing?"

He said, "You'll be flying all over the world," he said, "you'll have Tori Amos as well," he said, "you'll have four or five other people to look after." He said, "How do you fancy it?"

I said, "Well, I'm not sure."

He said, "I'll pay you ten times what you're getting here."

And so I said, "Well, I'm going to have to talk to my wife about it."

He says, "Don't leave it too long," he said, "I'll be offering it to somebody else in a week's time." He said, "You've got a week to make your mind up."

So I went home; I've got three young kids; I said to my wife, "I've been offered this huge job; loads of money."

She said, "Whatever you do I'll support you."

And I thought, 'Nah, I'll stay in Milton Keynes.' And so I turned it down and didn't go. And I met him once in an airport in Prague, walking through the airport; saw him coming towards me with his team and he came and he goes, "Chris Kemp," he said, "I bet you're regretting it now."

And I went, "Nah," and just walked on. *[Laughs]*

So there are lots of things that we've done, lots of stories of great bands, and I think some of those are horrible stories, like with Napalm Death, where it was the second gig we'd got the barrier in...(oh, sorry)...it was the second gig we'd got the barrier in and it was during the world cup and Sweden were playing and the drummer of Napalm Death made himself sick on the TV screen in front of everybody who was watching the screen and we thought, 'Oh, we're in for a good night then.' And so all of this was going on and I said to the band, I said, "Look," I said, "we've got this new barrier in, so we're trying to keep the band on the stage, the crowd where they are, but we'll facilitate them diving off the barrier so that, you know, they still have a good time. So the band came on stage and he went up to the mic and he just said, "Right, everybody on stage; the promoter doesn't want us on here, so f*** him." And that was it and it was away and it was just mental; and the team I had in the pit got kicked from behind by the band and hit from the front by the rest of the crowd, so we had to pull them out. So it was one of those nights but there were many of those kind of things took place there.

I think one of the nicest things about The Pitz was people loved it. We had a band called Babes in Toyland came, who were a female thrash metal band, and they specifically came because we had a swimming pool. And bands would come to us and sign

contracts after the gig to play again the year after. So, Thousand Yard Stare and bands like this, we'd already got signed up to play at The Pitz, which was really good. But I think that...that day with Babes in Toyland was the one day when I can clearly say that I knew that that was the kind of thing that I wanted to do because I went to the side of the stage and the band came on – it was sold out – and the crowd went absolutely wild and I just stared and thought, 'I did that.' And it was the first time I'd ever thought I actually had a part to play in that kind of thing.

But I also think there were some really quirky gigs. Going back to the Brothers Reunion again, where we had a giant blow-up gorilla in one corner of the gig – and it was a huge thing – and the band were on stage and suddenly this gorilla started to keel over as the band were playing...*[laughs]*...and it had burst, so this gorilla was coming down across the side of the stage. So three people had to run and hold it up; we turned the motor on; we were pushing this motor; then we had to foot-pump it to try and keep this gorilla up. And these were just strange things that happened. I can remember being held up against a wall by a German truck driver, by the neck, because we hadn't got his sandwiches on time.

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But some of those bands were just amazing and people's reactions, and people would stay behind and people would talk to us. We had people like Tom Robinson round for tea; we had thrash bands come to our house, five or six of them, to have tea because we hadn't made the food that night and they could come and have tea with us. And it was just brilliant because you wouldn't get that now: there's so many egos in the business that it just doesn't happen.

And in the green room, I always remember, with Frank Zappa's sons, Dweezil and Ahmet, where we were all in the corridor – coming down the corridor – and there was a guy sat outside with a submachine gun on his lap and I went up and I said, "Sorry, you can't have that in here." I said, "We can't have guns in here." I said, "This is England."

And he said, "Okay," he said, "let me tell you this." He said, "Frank's had five attempts made on his life this year. These are his sons; there could be an attempt made. I have this gun or we go home."

So I said, "Well, you'll have to put it in a bag then."

So he put it in a bag and sat at the back with this gun across his knees.

But, you know, met some great people who wanted some fantastic things. We had a band called Belly came with us and they were at the top of the Indie charts at the time. They came and Tanya Donnelly, the lead singer of Belly, came out to my office and she said, "Are you the promoter?"

I said, "Yes."

She said, "Can you find us ten really intelligent people to talk with at the end," she said, "because we'd really like to, you know, have a good time; we'll have some food with them and stuff," she said, "because it's so boring being on tour."

It's really difficult but I think the one time we made the papers really badly was when I banned Blur from the venue and that was because Graham Coxon, on stage, had thrown his guitar off stage and it split a guy's head down the middle in the audience, so he got rushed to hospital. And I came back and just said, "Look, we can't have this; we'll have to...we can't have this band here anymore; we can't have this kind of behaviour." They'd gone to the hospital to offer him all sorts of things. Next morning, in The Sun: 'Promoter Bans Band from Venue' and it all kicked off from there. And the funniest thing was, if you go back and look at the Brit awards for that year, when Blur won five Brit awards, they went up on stage and made a speech and this speech said, 'We'd like to thank everybody for everything they've done, except for that idiot...' – and they called me 'Clark Kent'...[laughs] – "who banned us from his venue," – instead of Chris Kemp; got the name wrong. So I thought, 'Well, I'm Superman at least, in somebody's eyes.' So these are the kind of things that always happen.

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[Break in interview to discuss technical issues]

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So, you've talked a lot about The Pitz and, I mean, it sounds like the sort of a...it's sort of high above the rest of the, sort of, cultural life in Milton Keynes at the time, so can you tell us roughly what was the area like generally, around...I mean, obviously, The Pitz was the place but was there a lot of other stuff going on, or did you not really know about a lot of other stuff going on...[unintelligible]...at the time?

Yeah, there was a lot of other stuff going on. I mean, some of the best stuff I went to see was when the Electra was open and Paul Price was doing some promotions there and had some fantastic gigs. I remember one Halloween night when there was a band on stage and they were showing a Superman film over the top of the band and it was just an absolutely brilliant night. And then there was The Courtyard which did a lot of little things. There was the Compass Club which did some bands. And there were lots of other things going on at the time. Especially the Bowl because, I mean, the Bowl was a big draw at that time because of the huge bands that came and that kind of opened up Milton Keynes to a kind of music tourism which it had never had before; and I think seeing some of those bands there and some of the things that took place was really great; and having the chance to work at the Bowl as well, at the time, kind of opened my eyes and gave me a few more strings to my bow because one of the jobs that I had at

the time, for Sony/Pace, was a photographer, so I used to take photographs of every band at the Bowl when they came to play, which was great stuff; and the other thing that that helped was that, if there was a support band on at the Bowl, they would play The Pitz on the Friday before the gig on the Saturday which, again, gave us something to look at.

It's not just about the music life of Milton Keynes, though, because it's had a rich cultural life as well and lots of theatre productions and, I mean, the four or five theatres that were there at the time were vying for all sorts of alternative theatre and mainstream as well, which was really good; there's community productions and all sorts of things going on. There's never a time really, in Milton Keynes, where there's nothing to do and it's a really important part of my life, is being in Milton Keynes itself, because, with the area and the people and the plethora of things to do – which is growing all the time because of the amount of people who are coming to live here because of where it is – and also the changes that take place. I mean, if you go to the City Centre now and... – I call it a city centre; it's always been a city to me – ...and you go to the City Centre and you look around, if you go back ten years, it's changed massively and things have been knocked down and new things have been built; if you go back twenty years, it's been changed even more; but, if you go back to when I first came, on one side of the city there was nothing at all: it was just wasteland really, or land to be built on. So that development and change has been just incredible, as time has gone forward. When the Development Corporation was dissolved, there was a bit of a kind of a hiccup and hiatus between that and English Partnerships kind of taking over; and that was a really difficult time I think.

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And then the development of sport, with Milton Keynes Dons and all sorts of other things – and basketball coming and then ice hockey coming: all of those kind of things that came round – really gives it a kind of rich tapestry. And, of course, where Milton Keynes stretches to: I mean, although my head office is in Milton Keynes, my...where we work is in Olney and, of course, Olney's got Milton Keynes postcodes; you go to Bedford, Bedford's got Milton Keynes postcodes. It all kind of links out and Milton Keynes is just growing and growing. And I think one of the biggest things was it started off as a dormitory town for London and Birmingham and actually, now, there's more people work here than probably work in London and Birmingham; it's changed the kind of way that this takes place.

So, how do...in your mind, how do you see the future of music in Milton Keynes, and bands, 'cause obviously The Pitz is no longer here?

With The Pitz not being here anymore, it's quite difficult. I think the generic change in music, as an entity across the UK, has been massive and it's changed from thousands of small promoters like myself, who were just promoting in their local area, to just major promoters who are bringing in the bigger bands and making lots of money out of it. What that's done is, it's meant we've got an arena culture, we've got a giant hall culture, and our small venue culture has been demeaned. But actually, it will come round again and it's starting to take off again now, with smaller venues putting bands on. I mean, if you take Paul, at The Craufurd, putting some of the things he puts on now, the things I would have gone and seen twenty, thirty years ago, which I'd love to go back to and see, because that kind of comes around. If you look at something like Classic Rock, the magazine – and I go through their pages at the back – nearly every bands in those pages we put on at The Pitz and it just shows that they're coming back and there's a resurgence; and I think, if you look at the new venues in Milton Keynes, and especially down at the stadium, the one difficulty with it – because I do a lot of work for arenas across the UK – is the size of the floor capacity and actually increasing that. One of the big things that I do is, I work with people like the O2 and Wembley and I do a...I increase their floor capacities by four, five, six hundred people – maybe in the O2 it would be seven per cent – to get more people in there so they can make more money; they can make more people come to the venue. I think, in Milton Keynes, we need to increase the size of the floor capacity for the venue and, funnily enough, I've got a meeting next week with the venue to look at how we can increase their floor size to get bigger bands in because it's very difficult to do that.

If you look at some of the bands that have been to the Bowl – and the Bowl doesn't have as many gigs on as it used to have because other venues now are bigger and they're able to get more in and, of course, it's all about money; it's not about the cultural life; it's not about music anymore; really; it's about getting as much profit as you can possibly make. Because that's where it's changed in the music industry: it's changed from doing it because you could and doing it because it was a great thing to do, to doing it because it's all about money. And I think that needs to change and there needs to be some development there to make that change back to looking at music from the point of view of it's a cultural development activity. And you need people to do these kind of things: to get young kids involved; to get the next set of promoters, venue managers, agents, all those people coming through. Every time I go to a conference where I'm speaking, I see all of the agents, all of the promoters, all of the venue managers that were there when I was running The Pitz; it hasn't changed; there's very few new people.

Could I just ask you, regarding the Bowl, because a few people we've interviewed have mentioned the Bowl – how brilliant; what fun; why don't we use it anymore? – it sounds like you have an inside knowledge about why it's not used anymore. Is it purely, as you say, because it's not a very big venue?

It's purely capacity and access. The difficulty with the Bowl is its capacity, the access that it has and the bands who want to come here because of where it is. Bands would rather play the major cities: one, because it's easier to get to and two, because they've got a bigger catchment area, they think. But the interesting thing is, if you have a one-off or maybe a three-gig tour in the UK and the Bowl is one of them, the Bowl will always sell out. But they're always looking to do Wembley 'cause it's the most prestigious venue now and it's just down the road. If you look at some of the other stadia, the stadia all over the country now opening their doors to putting events on, and the beauty of that is, you don't have to keep buying the elements in: they're already there in situ. And that's the most difficult part about it.

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Also, when you do something like the Bowl, the build is so much bigger and the costs, therefore, are so much higher, whereas, if you're doing a stadium, everything's there, all you have to do is cover the grass, then you put the PA and lighting in and then you're off. So, you know, it's a no-brainer really. It's a real shame because I love the Bowl; it's one of my favourite venues because of just how it is, you know, and every time there's a gig on there I will go because I just love going there because it's got...it's such a great greenfield site and there's nowhere like it in the UK.

So, you were saying earlier about how much you love Milton Keynes and if you went away you'd come back, kind of thing. Do you want to tell us what Milton Keynes means to you?

Milton Keynes means a great deal to me. I only came for a couple of months to see how I went and I've been here thirty years because there is nowhere like Milton Keynes; it has everything you want. I've brought up three kids here; I'm happily married here; I've got a business here; there's nowhere else I can go where I'd have the facilities that I want. I can go out of my house and I can put a pair of walking boots and within three minutes I'm out in the countryside. Within another five minutes I'm in the city. So the thing is, where else can you go where you've got all of those facilities as well? There's two great districts: there's the theatre district, there's the food courts; there's all sorts of things. It's just a great place to be. If I think of the benefits, it's quite interesting this because my wife and I sat down and we'd done our ten-year plan for the house: where were we going to move to? So we sat down and we looked at the benefits of living in Milton Keynes and where we were and the disbenefits. We had thirty-

five benefits and thought we'd better stop. We went to the disbenefits: we found three. So weighing that up, it's really the only place to live. It's just...it just has something that draws you there. There's nowhere else where I'd want to go. If...even when I worked as a pro-vice-chancellor at the university in Bucks, I had to travel to High Wycombe for twenty years, there and back – eighty-eight miles every single day – there was no way I was going to move that way; I lived in Milton Keynes.

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END OF INTERVIEW