

The morning sun slowly cooks the inside of your tent. You wipe away the mud flaking on your brow, and with a cider-induced thunderstorm crashing inside your skull you come round and ask yourself: did I get married last night? Many people who went to Glastonbury in the mid-2000s and visited Lost Vagueness, the festival's first after-hours party area, may well recognise this scenario. It hosted the Chapel of Love, an anarchic marriage institution that unofficially wed inebriated attendees (allegedly including Kate Moss and Pete Doherty) as well as offering a boxing ring for those who weren't getting along so well.

It was all part of a muddy take on immersive theatre, albeit one with a "turn a blind eye" policy to patrons bringing their own drugs and booze. Lost Vagueness's psychedelic backyard version of Vegas - presented through a blend of Victorian freak-show dress up, cabaret, burlesque casinos, ballroom dancing, scrapheap robots, 1950s kitsch and gothic glamour - was the festival within a festival that reignited a spark in Glastonbury during the period when it needed it most.

"We weren't selling as many tickets before it," Glastonbury founder Michael Eavis says in a new documentary, *Lost in Vagueness*, while former operations director Melvin Benn goes one further, saying: "Without it, Glastonbury would have died." The area ran from 2000 to 2007 and gave birth to the festival's "naughty corner" of carnivalesque nighttime revelry which, for many punters, is as much of an attraction as any band or DJ.

When it began, Lost Vagueness offered some glitz among the grime. Regular attendee Nick recalls his first time there in 2005 wearing a backless gown and fur coat. "In teen-movie

Lost Vagueness was an anarchic idea that reinvigorated a flagging Glastonbury. **Daniel Dylan Wray** charts the rise and fall of the festival's unusual after-hours cabaret

The original 'naughty corner'

dream sequence-style, we were greeted with approving glances and a nod. The velvet rope was held back and we entered into a heady mix of smoke, chandeliers, gaming tables complete with kitted-out croupiers, trapeze artists hanging from the roof and a topless female Elvis impersonator serenading the unflinching regulars. Making our way to the private bar we were informed they sold three things: champagne, whisky and cigars."

Like many, Nick found himself hours later in the chapel about to be hitched to a stranger. "We were married by a DJ in front of a congregation of pilled-up and passed-out revelers. We spent our honeymoon on a deserted bandstand watching the sun come

A still from *Lost in Vagueness*; below, **Empress Stah** in the *Lost Vagueness* ballroom



up and never saw each other again." Another unnamed attendee recalls going into the area, imbibing some LSD he was presented with in the casino by a fellow attendee, "seeing a lot of weird shit" and then waking up in a portable toilet the next day.

When film-maker Sofia Olins went there in the early 2000s she was instantly taken with its charms. "It gave that feeling of being a child, like, 'what have I stumbled upon?'" she tells me, just before her film's premiere at this year's Sheffield Doc/Fest.

Made up of footage she took in the years since, the film is ostensibly about Roy Gurvitz, Lost Vagueness's founder. A traveller, he began working at Glastonbury in 1986, first as a crew member, then a bar manager. His desire to create Lost Vagueness was triggered by abuse he and some friends received at Glastonbury when they

went out one night dressed up in leotards, suits and sparkles - outfits that are positively de rigeur these days. "One of us even got beaten up," he says. "You would think that would put us off, but it massively encouraged us, because we knew it would invoke something in people, that it would cause a reaction." So the next year they started a cafe, and ran a tent called Top Turns. "It was awful cabaret, very basic. It involved plying people with a lot of tequila, and once you've had enough tequila, then anything is cabaret, isn't it?"

The film documents Gurvitz's rocky relationship with Michael Eavis, capturing them butting heads spectacularly in a showdown over the positioning of some bars housed in giant aeroplane cockpits. "As far as I'm concerned, I've never really fallen out with Michael," Gurvitz says. "It was Melvin Benn who I was having problems with." Benn was brought in to help the festival professionalise,

and crack down on fence-jumpers; his more corporate style chafed with Gurvitz's traveller mentality. "I wanted Michael to have my back, but I guess he didn't." Their relationship broke down, and Gurvitz was "forced to walk away".

Gurvitz is argumentative in the film, and it's not difficult to see why he may have been tricky to work with, although age and time away from the festival appears to have mellowed him. "We weren't there to cause trouble, but we did," he says. Aside from the operational troubles and budget negotiations, Gurvitz's choice of acts also came into question. "One year a local vicar complained to Michael about Mouse's performance in the tent at 4am," Gurvitz recalls with a hearty laugh. The Mouse in question was a performer known for extreme acts, such as an enema with dog food to give the illusion of, well, you get it. "I asked the vicar what he was doing there at 4am. The complaint was withdrawn."

A vicar complained about one act, but what was he doing here at 4am?

Getting married at the Chapel of Love, 2005; below left, the ballroom tent, 2004



Despite leaving Glastonbury, Lost Vagueness mania had caught on with UK festivalgoers, and Gurvitz and his team were soon performing at other events, striking while the iron was hot. "We struck too much," Gurvitz says, "We never said no to anything." This crazy schedule, along with rising costs and infighting, meant the whole thing soon became untenable, and closed down in 2009. "It was never well thought out in terms of a business," Gurvitz says. "It was a bit like setting sail across the Atlantic in a rowing boat and going 'We can do this', and then ending up halfway across and going, 'Where are the bloody oars?' If I'd have carried on I would be six feet under."

In its place now is Shangri-La, a multi-area after-hours zone. Like many people involved today, its creative director Kaye Dunning's came from Lost Vagueness. She originally ran the Laundretta, a kitsch 1950s-style house that doubled up as a hair and nail bar. But while Shangri-La continues to grow more adventurous and politically engaged with every passing year - its 2017 theme is environmental waste - Lost Vagueness was perhaps too rigid to survive. "They were on the cusp of something enormous," says Gurvitz's one-time nemesis Melvin Benn. "It's sad, really, because what Roy created was extraordinary. If he could have allowed people to be inspired by him, rather than fearing them, I think he could have gone on to create great things."

Olins, meanwhile, feels that something like Lost Vagueness was always destined to implode. "Like any exciting underground movement it burns brightly and then dies," she says. "Maybe that is an implicit need of any game-changing cultural movement - it has to have that explosive nature to it."

Lost in Vagueness is screening at *Shangri-La* at Glastonbury Festival on Friday and Sunday at 3pm. There is a one-off London screening on 13 July, tickets available at lostinvagueness.com



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