

**From classical and jazz beginnings in Auckland, Mark de Clive-Lowe is now mashing up the genres of nu-jazz and alternative soul all over the world. Rip It Up caught up with the keyboardist extraordinaire during a fleeting visit home.**

By Frances Chan  
Photography: Justin Redding

# Mark de Clive-Lowe

## NU-JAZZ IN THE PRESENT TENSE

London. Depending on where your head's at, it can suck the life right out of you or bless you with creative nirvana. I had no doubt that Mark de Clive-Lowe would reach the latter in the dirty ol' town. Whenever he guested on my bFM jazz show in the late nineties, I thought he was one of the most earnest and organised musicians in Auckland. He arrived on time. He spoke succinctly. Even his press releases were well written. And then I'd trot down to the now long closed jazz haunts Manifesto or Cause Célèbre to hear him play. Musical talent oozed out of his fingers and onto the keyboard.

Acid jazz may have been the rage back then, but Mark's style cast a wider net.

"I love painting with rich colours in my music," he says. "Finding ways to bring elements in that people would not necessarily expect."

After making three jazz albums he changed direction and released *The Island of Nuvonesia* in 2000 with DJ Manuel Bundy and MC Imon Star under the name Nuvonesia. The album fused hip-hop, melodic keys and programmed beats. That same year de Clive-Lowe also released his next solo album, *Six Degrees*, which was picked up by Universal UK and marketed as a jazz-dance record, which is when he permanently hustled his way over to London. Today, he performs live and djs all over Europe, regularly touring the States, Japan and Australia. He's produced, remixed and played keys on more than 150 recordings. His creative community includes some of the most influential crews in club music – Masters at Work, 4Hero, Restless Soul, Bugz in the Attic and Lady Alma to name a few.

His last album, 2006's *Tide's Arising*, is a slick interpretation of 21st century soul, while his latest Japanese-only release, *Journey 2 The Light*, pays homage to 70s fusion. On another tip altogether is the *Politik*, a collaboration with

Brazilian vocalist Bembe Segue. The self-titled debut album is a seriously funk-up baby born from a musical coition of broken beat, nu-soul, hip-hop and jazz. Keen to encourage more twisted beat-making, de Clive-Lowe has offered up the *Politik* songs and artwork for remixing. You can download the parts at [www.remixthepolitik.blogspot.com](http://www.remixthepolitik.blogspot.com) and the winning remixes and artwork will be released worldwide as *The Politik Remixed*.

In contrast to the meticulous studio work, Mark lets rip live at his regular Freesoul Sessions club nights. And he really does mean live. The only rule being that everything is improvised. Mark sets up his MPC3000 drum sampler, synth bass, Fender Rhodes and Clavinet keyboard and an interchanging mix of musicians turn up to make a party.

"I'll program the beats, get the synth bass looping and add different keyboard parts. No one knows what I'm gonna do, key change or tempo change. Singers write on the spot so

there's no repertoire. I'm doing a full studio production on the fly live on stage and there's no safety net. It's real do or die shit."

Do or die brings to mind Mark's gig in February at Auckland's Union Fish Building with Sharlene Hector (Basement Jaxx) and beatbox champion Beardyman. When the power supply to the bass synth blew only 20 minutes into the set, there was a momentary sense of panic.

"It was like having an arm torn off when you're about to go up to bat," he recalls. To save the day de Clive-Lowe promptly asked Beardyman to beatbox the basslines that he would start playing from his keyboard.

"With zero hesitation he was up on stage with mic in hand laying down b-lines as if we'd rehearsed it."

Despite the technical amputation, the beats and bass were phat, Sharlene's vocals uplifted the vibe and the crowd rocked till the wee hours.

Mark's mission to innovate music genres and to bring the real core of improvisation to club music is hitting paydirt. Every project leads to new fans. His remix of Shirley Horn's 'Return to Paradise' for Verve sparked the ears of 80s R'n'B diva Jody Watley. A MySpace relationship ensued and he ended up doing a remix for her. Marvin Gaye's songwriter Leon Ware jumped up on a live jam and now wants to do tracks together. A gig with Lauryn Hill came about when her management saw one of his shows in Miami. Most recently he submitted tracks to Jill Scott and she chose five of them to develop. Erykah Badu is next in line

Could it get any bigger? You bet. Mark's wish list includes Q-Tip, D'Angelo and Herbie Hancock.

"I know these artists are within two degrees of separation to me now, so it's just a matter of time and diligence," he says. "I can really see what I want to do manifesting."

The connections are already there. He's met Herbie a few times and worked with Pino Palladino, the bass player on D'Angelo's *Voodoo* album.

"When everyone around me says 'you should work with D', it's only a matter of time before someone says to D, 'you should work with Mark'. Whether he does or not is another question, but it's nice to know that things are at a level where people dig what I do."

With a dream team that's all-American, a move to LA could see his career skyrocketing. London buzzes with underground culture and energy, but LA has better industry infrastructure. So how's a half-Japanese, half-Kiwi producer going to fare in Lalaland?

"American artists see that culturally I'm pretty twisted and they really appreciate that. Half-Asians have become their own cultural force in America."



*"I'm doing a full studio production on the fly live on stage and there's no safety net. It's real do or die shit."*

— Mark de Clive-Lowe

Mark's ambitions remain true, even if the road to creative nirvana is steering him Stateside.

"I want to arouse people's interest in culture and the art of music. Not to sound too much like an old man, but that's something that's dying in this day and age." Hey, a lot can be said for being earnest and organised. ✪

