

Blackmarket Records

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At first glance, the corner of Queen West and Bathurst in downtown Toronto, with its plethora of all night fast food joints, aging club venues and down-and-out people, may seem a strange place to open a record store. But a visit quickly reveals a definite energy about the area and it seems a good match for the store.

As Blackmarket owner, Rene Gelston explains, the location of the store was well planned out, as was the whole decision to open Blackmarket records in Toronto. Originally from England, Gelston heard from numerous sources that Toronto would be a good place to open a store, but wanted to check out the scene first. "I went to some clubs and checked out what was going on and checked if there really was a scene here or not," he says explaining he was shocked at the diversity of music in Toronto and felt the scene was strong.

Gelston hooked up with his business partner Carl Collins (manager of Hard Leaders) through Mickey Finn. "He gave me his concept of what he wanted to do in North America and I was really into the idea," says Collins, who was already in Toronto working on his own music projects. "(Gelston) came to Toronto to have a look around and stayed at my place for a while. We basically spend six months looking for a location."

"I had to look around town to find the best place to put the shop, and it's hard because you've only got so many streets that people walk down," Gelston explains. "In London you've got eight million people willing to walk around a corner to find a small shop, but here I'm not so sure. So we put in on one of the main streets."

Gelston also wanted the shop in a building where sound would not be an issue. "You don't realize it when you come into the shop, but all the walls go back another two feet. There's a total steel construction behind the walls and it's all sound-proofed," he says. So far, artists including Darren Jay and Kenny Ken have played live in the shop and there are plans for bigger and better things involving North American artists.

Both Collins and Gelston are positive about North America's dnb scene, but agree it is different than the UK. They are taking their time establishing Blackmarket Records while also getting acquainted with the North American scene. "With North America the way it is, you need to be here to understand it properly," says Collins.

Gelston has spent his career at the forefront of the underground dance music scene and drew on his years of experience when considering plans for the store. He has lived in London nearly 25 years but also spent time in New York, Paris,

Milan and other cities where he was involved in the scene in some way.

"I created Blackmarket Records in 1984 as a rare-groove night at the Wag club in Soho, and that ran for five years," he explains. "Then I went to New York and opened a club in New York during the House music period. That was during '86-'97 and they were the last years of the (legendary House music club) Paradise Garage as well."

After returning to England from New York, Gelston began playing house at his club night at the Wag club before ending it. "I stopped the night at the Wag club and started the Blackmarket Records store in '87," he says.

Blackmarket Records played a key role in the evolving UK house and rave scenes, and was even featured in Rolling Stone Magazine. In 1990 Gelston sold the store to Nicky Blackmarket and Dave Piccione and went to work for Universal/MCA Records where he started the Blackmarket record label.

The London shop continues to operate, but is a separate entity from the Toronto store. Gelston explains that there is a contract granting permission for Nicky Blackmarket and the store he owns with Piccione to continue using the name. Since opening May 25th, Gelston says the shop's reception seems positive, but it is too early to really tell.

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