

Jason Ford

Sweatbox sauna general manager and multimedia artist Jason Ford explains how he thinks the gays of London can improve their community.

Where are you from originally?
I refer to myself as Anglo-Austral-African-American; I was born in New York, grew up in Australia and now I'm a British citizen.

And where do you live now?
I live in Soho with my husband, Mark, and a revolving door of waifs and strays who are between homes. Suffice it to say we don't conform to hetero norms.

What do you love about London?
I love that London is the most multicultural city on Earth. I know that gets said a lot, but I'm a New Yorker at heart and we pride ourselves on being the melting pot, but I never truly understood what that meant until I moved to London and saw what true multiculturalism means. This whole Brexit thing is ridiculous and I'm sick of the rest of the country whining about London all the time. It's fucking hard to live here but still we choose to because we love it. We are all immigrants to London really. That's what makes it the most powerful city on earth. And the coolest. You want to take our immigrants away? Don't be ridiculous – there'd be no one left but one pudgy, angry white man working at a takeaway in Walthamstow.

You own and run Sweatbox with your husband, Mark, but when you're not busy running Sweatbox what do you do?
My background is as a multimedia artist and Mark's is as a TV and film producer. Most recently we have been working together on a series of art based projects under the brand name Mr and Mr Ford; our tagline is "Provocation. Deviation. Masturbation", which is pretty indicative of our general direction. It's early days but it's been a lot of fun. In particular it's been great reaching out, collaborating and building up a network of like-minded artists in make up, fashion, filmmaking and a lot of cabaret. Cabaret seems so important in the dark days – of which there look to be plenty to come.

What are your feelings about the

current gay scene in London?
Like I say, these are dark days. There's a lot of blaming social media dominance, horrible rent hikes, the emergence of chem sex etc. But I think the route problem lies in a kind of disconnect that seems to be getting worse, when so much for us of late has actually been getting better, such as equality and acceptance. It's not simple. But we need to reach out to each other, to relearn some social skills and stop trying to be so clever and cynical and quick to take offence all the time.



I want to grab everyone and shake them and say 'you're not the only one that's lonely. We're all lonely. Why not be lonely together?' So we're trying to get a major arts event off the summer of this year – 50 years since being gay became legal – called We Fuck to Make Friends. Because, historically, this is what we have always done. It's what makes us different as a culture. Better, in my opinion. But we seem to have lost that ethos of late, in part due to an increase in sex shaming. Casual sex is great – Grindr, saunas, whatever. But a cup of tea and a chat after is where the real intimacy is. It may not lead to



a marriage, but it could lead to friendship. And friends don't let friends be lonely.

What is your favourite clubbing experience?
Anything where I can dress up – where we can be fun, proud, drunk and loud. My world seems to have collided with a bunch of amazingly talented club kids like Luke Harris and Luke Anderson, and the results have been a big, sticky, spectacular mess.

What is your favourite club?
XXL is great. But we're working hard at reinventing the house party and so far they've been a lot of fun. Not all house parties need to be chill outs; ours are full on, old fashioned fun with themes and entertainment, naked waiters and lots of dressing up. Our most recent was called Humbergery and it was an anti-Christmas, anti-2016 demolition party. It was great. The gay scene in London spread itself too thin and became so soullessly commercial. I prefer parties to clubs because parties are about people.

What did you make of 2016?
We lost a lot of heroes and gained a lot of villains. Not a great year. But as a black gay man this is still the best time ever to be alive. We

had eight years of Obama, now four years of Trump – after every two steps forward we take a step back but that's life. The important thing is that this is now 2017. We know the score, we know where the problems are. Now we need to take a deep breath, fix the problems and keep moving forward. As Mr and Mr Ford we're busy working on our art launch party for the spring. If we could do one thing this year it would be to help rid ourselves of the prurient sex-shaming we heap upon ourselves as a community. It's 2017 folks, grow up, stop judging and start living.

If you had one piece of advice to yell at gay London what would it be?

Young gays – listen to your old gays. Old gays – stop sneering at young gays and calling them millennials like that's a thing. It's not. It's only a thing because somebody coined a word. Without that word they are just young. Which is what they are supposed to be. Let's stop this age apartheid. We need each other.

Jason is general manager at Sweatbox (sweatboxsoho.com) and is one half of the art duo Mr and Mr Ford (MrandMrFord.com).