



**Richard Carr**

is a pioneer who is used to getting arrows in his back.

He has conquered the Bournemouth scene and now he is entering new territory.

Kate Oppenheim reports from the frontline

# CARR

**KING**

To some he is the king of Bournemouth, to others he is an aggressive competitor who has begun to move his empire out of his seaside stronghold into new areas of the South West, while also making strides onto the international club and music scene.

On first meeting Richard Carr - who owns the Opera House, the Sam Bar, Urban and the Slinky brand - it is apparent that he is not a man who likes wasting time. Slamming both hands down on to the table between us, he begins: "So, what do you want to know?"

At 42, this impeccably suited, larger-than-life character doesn't exactly look like a man who has his finger on the pulse of youth culture and young clubbers who lust after hardcore music and late night entertainment. But Carr says he's in front, when it comes to knowing what the 18-25s want.

"We lead, we create the trends. We are at the cutting edge of the business," says Carr. "I've always been a bit of a pioneer. In fact, John Conlan (chairman of Chokor) once said to me, when I was chief executive of Allied Leisure: 'Well Richard, one thing is for sure, you will always get plenty of arrows

in your back.' I asked him, 'well, why is that John?', and he said, 'because you are a pioneer. Pioneers get arrows in their back. But I've got a big back.'"

Slinky began life as a Friday night at the Opera House, a club that he acquired in 1999. He has built it into a national brand with rights being hosted by other clubs all over the UK. "Tonight we will be doing these rights at the Ministry of Sound, here at the Opera House and at a club in the Midlands. Slinky is known for providing quality and fantastic nights."

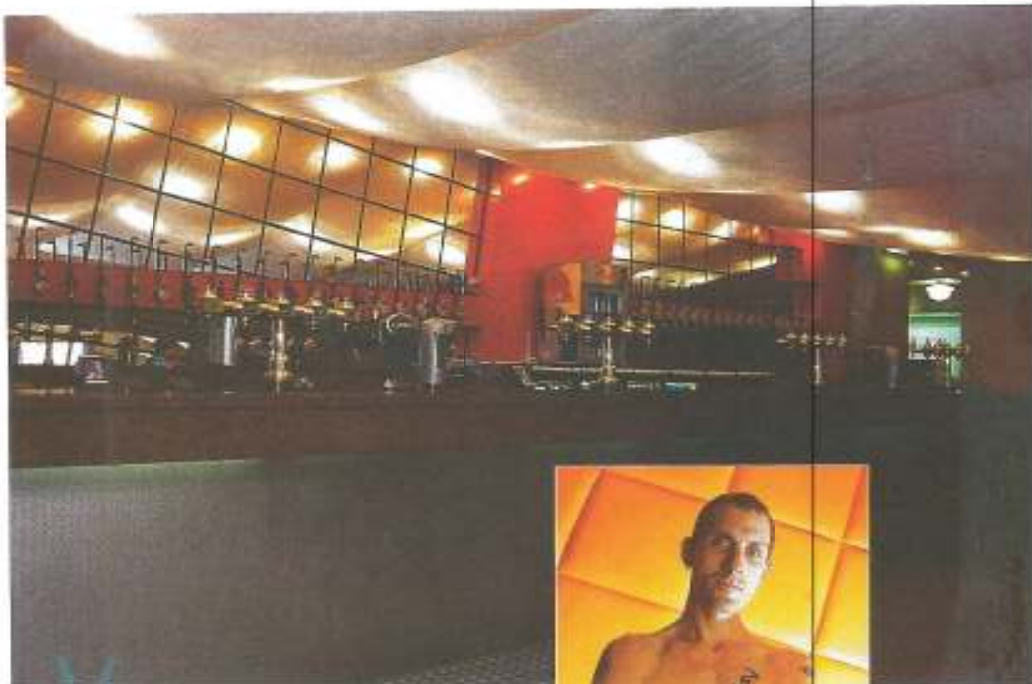
The Opera House, he says, is one of the most successful clubs in the UK, attracting 7,000 customers a week. "It's a very busy, very big business. We get 60,000 hits a day on our website."

The Slinky brand has started to creep around the world too: Canada, Hong Kong, Japan, China, Singapore, and the US. It has just completed a tour in Australia, where its latest album got to number one in the compilation charts. Slinky is following in the footsteps of the Ministry of Sound, with its club nights, merchandise and international acclaim.

Carr has also set up Slinky Artist Management, which looks after up-and-coming DJs on the p-

Photography  
**Mike Quick**





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music scene, such as Liza Lashes, Gary White and Tim Lyell. There is also a recording studio on the Opera House premises, Slinky Music Limited. Together, his empire (Future 3000) provides him with every facet of the music business imaginable.

But when he first sowed the Slinky seed, three years ago, he claims that never in his wildest dreams did he ever envisage it being as successful as it is now. Ask for some figures to confirm just how successful the overall business has become, and not surprisingly Carr refuses to play ball. What he will divulge is that business at the Opera House has grown from nothing, since he brought it in 1996, to having an annual turnover of £3 million.

So what's next? "I'm not going to tell you that! We take one hurdle at a time. We knock down one territory at a time. We keep the whole thing moving and fresh."

"As long as you keep your finger on the pulse it's not hard. I think the big problem with this industry is that a lot of people don't understand why they are successful. If you don't understand why you are successful, then you can't really adjust when things change. A lot of people get things right on day one, but a year down the road they look and think, 'well, what went wrong?'. They were just lucky with their first hit."

Carr would say that his success has been down to judgement more than luck. He's prepared to try new things and stretch his customers to new limits. "When I first opened the Sam Bar in Bournemouth, it really was the first of its kind. There were the



**Slinky is taken seriously by its fans. Neil Reynolds, who boasts a Slinky tattoo on his chest, has been coming regularly since it opened**

Yates's, Edwards, Bar Vin and O'Nells, all of the very roll-out boring bullshit, then all of a sudden I came along and said, 'okay, what we need is something keen and cutting edge'. To be honest with you, it wobbled a little bit for the first six months while it was finding its market. But again, that was because it was cutting edge. Now it is, without a doubt, per square foot the busiest bar in Bournemouth.

"People have found it. Every night there is something different. It has the right mix of DJs, the right promotions, the right feel. It is something the plos can't achieve. They may be able to build bars that look good, but just look at Cass. Whitehead has finally found a concept that looks good, but it can't run them to save its life. It opened to its all-singing, all-dancing bit of glory, but three months down the road you get warm beer and baseball chewing gum. "I am a big standards man."

Training is one thing, but employing good people is the critical factor. "A lot of the training in these companies is just lip-service. You can't train a monkey to speak. Quite often managers employ the wrong people. It's as simple as that."

The Opera House hosts Slinky on a Friday night



"The whole emphasis has got to be on human resources. A lot of these big companies would be far better spending that little bit more on employing better managers and ditching half the budget from the training departments, because then what would they get? They would get good quality managers who would employ good quality people who know what they were doing."

Speak to any of the people working for Carr and they share a common enthusiasm for the business. They seem to like and respect him. Later that evening, when he's propping up the bar in the Opera House's VIP lounge, there's a young crowd around him. He's good company, and despite that appearance, he's a friendly, affable guy who enjoys life and living.

He will need more good people around him soon. Human resources, as he puts it, dictate the pace he can move his business forward. In December he is set to open a new 10,000sq ft bar in Bournemouth called Bliss. A far cry from Slam's industrial, steel and glass minimalism, Bliss will provide comfort in opulent surroundings.

He has also "assembled" a group of properties and will be developing a new club called Oka -

Japanese for 'bucket'. Its door will be Fair Eastern. Shop-fitting begins in January, with doors set to open next summer.

After that, Carr says there isn't much more he can do in Bournemouth. "When I left Allied Leisure in 1994, a company I started in 1987, I decided that I was never ever going back to a lifestyle where I was living in a motorcar. But just recently I have started to make offers on properties in the South West - Bristol, Bath, Exeter, Plymouth, Southampton. So I will move on to the next town and do the same. It's unfortunate because I will have to spend more time in the motorcar."

Meanwhile, Carr is busy with promoting the business and building up customer databases.

"I am a terrorist promoter. We are very aggressive in the way we promote, we always have been. We spend a fortune promoting and I think that is another reason for our success."

"We print 100,000s of flyers a month, which we get into people's hands. Something we are spending a lot of money on at the moment is text messaging. We are slowly accumulating masses of mobile phone numbers of our customers."

Asking customers to write their mobile telephone number and email address on tickets in order to get them validated is one way he collects, and Carr reckons he already has about 25,000 numbers. "Very shortly we will be able to email or text people on a Friday afternoon: 'Slinky tonight, Judge Jules appears. Tickets £12', and whack, that's 25,000 people with a text message."

With so much in the offing, here's another message that he might like to send to other bar and club operators: "Carr coming your way. Move over, or get crushed". The king of Bournemouth is on the march.

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