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Why Paul Oakenfold Became the First-Ever Artist to Play Stonehenge

“No other artist has ever played there and a lot of people have tried, including the Rolling Stones,” says British music pioneer

By **ANDY HERMANN** 





Paul Oakenfold performing at Stonehenge.

Anton Nelson / AHTOH

Paul Oakenfold likes to boldly DJ where no man has DJ'ed before. In 2003, he became the first person to tote turntables onto the Great Wall of China. Last year, he played a set for the sherpas and mountaineers at **Everest Base Camp**. And on Thursday night, as the sun set over Salisbury Plain, he performed the first DJ set ever presented at the 4,500-year-old circle of monoliths that is Stonehenge.

“No other artist has ever played there and a lot of people have tried, including the Rolling Stones,” the British electronic music pioneer tells *Rolling Stone* from his Los Angeles home.

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The performance, which Oakenfold says took over two years to arrange, wasn't just to reassert his status as one of the world's biggest DJs. Like his Everest set, which raised money for various causes including the Himalayan Trust, he played Stonehenge for charity — in this case, **English Heritage**, the organization that manages over 400 historical sites throughout England. English Heritage will receive proceeds from the sale of Oakenfold's Stonehenge set, which will be released digitally and sold at English Heritage gift shops, as well as from the release of a new Oakenfold track named after and inspired by the prehistoric site.

For his sundown set, the British DJ largely eschewed the house and trance music for which he's best known in favor of more atmospheric works by artists as diverse as U2, Lana Del Rey, the Weeknd and Ennio Morricone. "It's more than a DJ playing electronic music," Oakenfold explains of his track selections. Rather than soundtrack a dance party for the event's tiny guest list (just 50 invited attendees), Oakenfold wanted to curate "an iconic moment — because of the venue and because it's never been done."

After he premiered his new "Stonehenge" track at the conclusion of his set, his good friend and fellow DJ Carl Cox joined him on the decks. Colored lights illuminated the stones as guests listened on "silent disco" headphones. Amplification was kept to a minimum to avoid any potential damage to the ancient stones, one of the oldest manmade structures on Earth and a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Oakenfold's Stonehenge set was coordinated by Alon Shulman, an event producer and entrepreneur who has worked closely with English Heritage on several initiatives to help the charity raise its profile with a younger audience. "The pinnacle for the event world is Stonehenge," he noted, speaking by phone a few days before the event.



Paul Oakenfold at Stonehenge.

Others before had tried and failed to stage music events at Stonehenge, including the Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin and, most recently, Ryan Adams, whose **planned 2007 Stonehenge gig** was cancelled at the last minute over fears that the site would be overrun by gate-crashers. A renegade event called the Stonehenge Free Festival was held every year in a neighboring field from 1974 to 1984, but never granted permits to stage music at the Stonehenge site itself.

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To appease English Heritage's concerns that Oakenfold's appearance would simply turn into a rave, organizers kept the actual date of the performance a closely guarded secret. They also agreed to carry all of Oakenfold's equipment in and out by hand, rather than wheel or drag it up to the monument, since the entire area surrounding it is an active archeological site. "I've got 20 guys just lifting stuff," Shulman says. After the performance, Oakenfold stayed to watch the sun rise over the stones.

With Stonehenge in the books, Oakenfold hopes to perform more DJ sets at other English Heritage sites, some of which might also feature guest vocalists and a full orchestra. For him, continuing to bring his music to landmark settings is a way to answer the question: "What can I do that really motivates me and challenges me at the age I am and the stage I'm [at] in my career?"

"I'm a big fan of history," Oakenfold adds. "So to get involved with the English Heritage and be a part of something like this — for me, I was like straightaway, 'Yeah, of course I'll do it.'"