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## LIFESTYLE FEATURE

### The Touring Life of a Superstar

by Kevin Raub

**Late-night after-parties, VIP treatment, all-expenses-paid trips to places most people only dream about, and, oh yeah – virtually no sleep. Welcome to the life of the world’s most acclaimed DJ.**



#### Paul Oakenfold

Paul Oakenfold’s highly anticipated new album, *A Lively Mind*, is due out next month. He spent 17 whirlwind days touring Central and South America to preview tracks from the record.

#### Author

Kevin Raub is a Los Angeles-based travel and entertainment journalist. His work has appeared in *Travel+Leisure*, the *New York Post*, *FHM*, and *Stuff*, among other publications. He loves electronic music as much as the next guy, but enjoys his beauty sleep more.

From high atop Hotel Unique’s Skye Bar in São Paulo, Brazil, all the madness that is the third-largest city in the world lines the horizon. It’s a jaw-dropping architectural marriage of concrete and steel that begins as far as one can see to the left and that hasn’t yet ended as far as one can see to the right. It’s a view that some might say must be seen to be believed, though I’ve seen it many times before and I still can’t believe it. Neither can DJ Oakenfold, whom I’ve come here to meet for a drink. Walking out past the pool to the glass partition that keeps guests from falling into the Jardins Europa district seven stories below, we pause to absorb the beauty of the vast panorama before us. As the world’s most internationally recognized DJ-remixer-producer, Oakenfold has spent the last 15 years so traversing the globe armed with little more than two turntables and a box of vinyl ammunition. He has performed in places you dream of visiting (the Great Wall of China, Ibiza, Cyprus), and, as an absolute road warrior and savvy traveler (he carries 39 frequent-flier cards with him), Oakenfold once played three continents in four days. Needless to say, the man I’ve been there, seen that. Tonight, however, he won’t be seeing much of São Paulo. Oakenfold is dead tired. It’s nine p.m., and he has just arrived via Buenos Aires, where he spun records all night long to a worshipping crowd of 60,000 (set time: three a.m.). If he has slept at all, his eyes, and those of tour manager Michael Jackson, don’t show any sign of it. The week before that, in El Salvador and Colombia, there wasn’t much sleep either. I know this because I didn’t catch much shut-eye myself – hitting the road with the most successful DJ in the history of the record spinning does one heck of a number on one’s sleeping pattern.

**BEHIND ONE WEEK** I meet the 35-year-old Oakenfold in his Los Angeles

**REWIND ONE WEEK.** I meet the 35-year-old Oakenfold in his Los Angeles home (though a British citizen, he relocated three years ago), where I'm packing for our red-eye flight to San Salvador. I get a chance to snore through the gold and platinum records – both his own and the highly successful ones that he has produced or scored (Happy Mondays' *Pill Thrills & Bellyaches*, for instance, or the sound track to *The Matrix Reloaded*) – that line the walls of his home studio, as well as the kind of personal music memorabilia (BMI Film Music Awards, Grammy nominations) that musicians of his caliber tend to fill their basements with. But it's a ranting letter from the late Hunter S. Thompson to Oakenfold's former lawyer that is the true treasure here, though beyond the greeting that opens the letter, there is absolutely nothing suitable for printing in this magazine.

Suffice it to say, Thompson was adequately ticked off at the lawyer – we'll call her Shirley – over his payment for his participation in a track on Oakenfold's 2002 debut, *Bunkka* (Nixon's Spirit). He let Shirley know about it in no uncertain terms, using just the kind of colorful language that Thompson made a living off of. Oakenfold says Shirley called him in near-tears. "What are you crying about?" he asked her. "You've just gotten a letter from Hunter S. Thompson!" And so it hangs framed on Oakenfold's office wall.

Oakenfold travels light, with one Tumi suitcase (meticulously packed) and a smaller Tumi bag that houses his records and CDs. This is henceforth guarded as if it contains the Holy Grail, which, for a DJ, I guess it does. Without music, there is no show (or career, for that matter). Not to mention that, in addition to his music, the equipment in his home studio is the crown jewel for thieves who prey on electronic artists (it is for this reason that I'm not allowed to disclose the whereabouts of Oakenfold's home). After catching an episode of *Joey* (yes, *Joey*), we head off for where Oakenfold gets chosen for a secondary security screening. Ever since celebrities aren't immune.

Oakenfold is embarking on this 17-day Central and South American tour to preview new tracks from his long-awaited sophomore effort, *A Lively Mind*, out next month on Madonna's Maverick Records. Like *Bunkka*, best known for its radio hit "Starry-Eyed Surprise" (recently immortalized in a widely popular Diet Coke commercial), *A Lively Mind* is full of guest vocalists, including actress Brittany Murphy, hip-hop legend Grandmaster Flash, and producer extraordinaire Pharrell Williams.

"This record is a lot more melodic than the last record, still incorporating cutting-edge rhythms, but not so down-tempo," says Oakenfold of his latest effort, a project four years in the making. "It's taken me a long time to do. It always does. I always start off really quick and then I tend to leave the record – I don't go into the studio traditionally like other artists and spend three or four months on a record. I'll spend a month on it, then stop and go score a movie, and then come back to it. And I think so it's naturally going to take me longer."

Once we land in San Salvador, we're whisked off by the promoters on a gig, set for that evening at the Amphitheatre FERIA Internacional. It's

Oakenfold's first time in El Salvador, and he wastes no time quizzing hosts on how to best make his visit worthwhile. "What is the local drink he asks. "What is the local food?" Pilsener beer and *pupusas* (handmade tortillas stuffed with everything from cheese to pork rinds chicken), we're told.

We check into the Real InterContinental Hotel around nine a.m. and go straight to bed. For the most part, it will be the only sleep we get over the next three days. We wake up at four p.m. and hit the hotel bar for piñacoladas and a game of pool. The drinks are excellent, and we ponder a second round, but Oakenfold holds off due to the high fat content in the coconut cream. Though he lives a hard lifestyle, he does his best to stay fit.

Later, when Oakenfold arrives at the venue for a sound check, the sound engineer is nowhere to be found. Scrambling occurs around a frenzy of phone calls, and the engineer is eventually tracked down at a nearby restaurant. It turns out he has secured the wrong mixer (a Pioneer instead of a Rane) and, as a result, nothing is working properly. Oakenfold is visibly convinced the sound engineer is out of his league – a notion that is confirmed after it takes the guy an hour and a half of fumbling with the wire before he gets it right.

If you've ever wondered what it's like to be a rock star on the road here's a glimpse: The promoter pays for everything – hotels, food, alcohol, work visas, and whatever else one might need. The rock star doesn't spend a cent. With this in mind, we hit a local joint called *Tío Margoth* for pupusas and beer. We feast like vultures on the local specialties and never see a bill. Afterward, Oakenfold wanders over to the next-door gallery housing work from El Salvador's most famous painter, Fernando Llort. He purchases five crosses, which he happens to collect (though he's not a berreligious, some parts of his home look like a catholic sanctuary). With that, we're whisked back to the gig, where Guatemalan rum and Russian vodka await.

After an hour or so of imbibing, Oakenfold goes on around 11:15 p.m. early, by his standards. For the next two hours, he masterfully toys with the Salvadorans in attendance like an audio puppet master, slowly building the beats per minute (BPM) used to calculate the timing of a song from a methodic space trip at the beginning to a frantic blitzkrieg by show's end. Every time Oakenfold seamlessly marries two songs together there is a collective shriek from the audience that rises in volume along with the crescendo of the music. The whole thing is like one long tantamount manipulation of sound. The buzz of the show makes sleep nearly impossible, so afterward, we head off to a VIP after-party at a nearby restaurant. More rum. More food. It's nearly five a.m. before we arrive back at the hotel.

**THE NEXT DAY**, during a layover in Panama, Oakenfold tells me, "I never thought I would get to see the world through a box of records, but I have. I used to go on an annual holiday prior to DJing – Rio, Japan, America – when I was, like, 16 years old. But then I started to focus on DJing and started getting invited to go and play. So, suddenly, I went from backpacking on a small, struggling holiday to traveling business class."

backpacking on a small, struggling holiday to traveling business class staying in five-star hotels. It's been great.

Things are so great in business class, in fact, that Oakenfold makes an effort to taunt tour manager Jackson and me, who are stuck in the first row of coach, just behind the superstar DJ. "Could you please bring me a lobster and fill up my glass of Champagne?" he asks, just loudly enough for us to salivate. He's kidding, of course. Today's long day of travel afforded no lobster or Champagne, but rather Subway sandwiches between quick stops in Managua, Nicaragua, and Panama City, Panama, on our way to Bogotá, the capital of Colombia.

The last time Oakenfold played Colombia, he was greeted at the airport by armed escorts, but violence in the country has dramatically receded under current president Álvaro Uribe, and we are instead met by three unarmed bouncers. Our plans for catching a quick nap are foiled when we're told we must make the hour-long trip out to the venue for a sound check before checking into our hotel. By the time we do, it's nearly midnight and there will be no siestas before Oakenfold's two a.m. set. Once at the hotel, we barely have time to set our bags down and brush our teeth before we depart for the venue for the second time in two hours.

On the way back to the venue, a squirrely Colombian journalist fresh out of college and whom nobody in Oakenfold's entourage seems to know anything about, somehow manages to stow away in our van. He asks Oakenfold to sign 10 autographs (one alone is a big no-no for a journalist; 10 warrants a *Punk'd* episode), and Oakenfold begrudgingly obliges. Things turn ugly a few minutes later, though, when Oakenfold, who is trying to catch some sleep in the back of the van, is awoken by the glow of light on the journalist's video camera. It's a tense moment as the journalist accuses the journalist of filming him sleeping and the journalist struggles to explain himself in broken English. (As one might imagine, the journalist found his own ride back into town after the show.)

Oakenfold tears through another blistering set, which doesn't end until nearly five a.m. Of course there's an after-party, and of course we are. The promoters secure us a bottle of *aguardiente*, the country's vaguely licorice-flavored liquor, though it doesn't go over well with this crowd. Kudos to Oakenfold, however, for his interest in local culture. "You should embrace it as much as you can," he says. "Local foods, sights, drinks. What we usually like to do is get a couple of days [in each destination] that's usually not as hectic as this."

The sun is already up when we head back to the hotel. The mass, sunglassesed exodus from the venue is reminiscent of a zombie movie. It's as if I've undertaken a sleep-deprivation study for which I will receive compensation and I've been on tour only for a few days. Oakenfold and his entourage do this on a regular basis, a thought that prompts a part of my brain in charge of sleep to beg, "Make it stop."

Back in São Paulo, I suggest Oakenfold try the local poison, *cachaça* (a sugar-cane-based rum), made into a caipirinha with the addition of lime and sugar. "I'm drunk out," he tells me between yawns. He opts for a *maracujá* juice, a South American fruit (known as passion

fruit in English) believed to have sedative qualities. It seems Oakenfol needs his rest.

Photographs by Anna Schori

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