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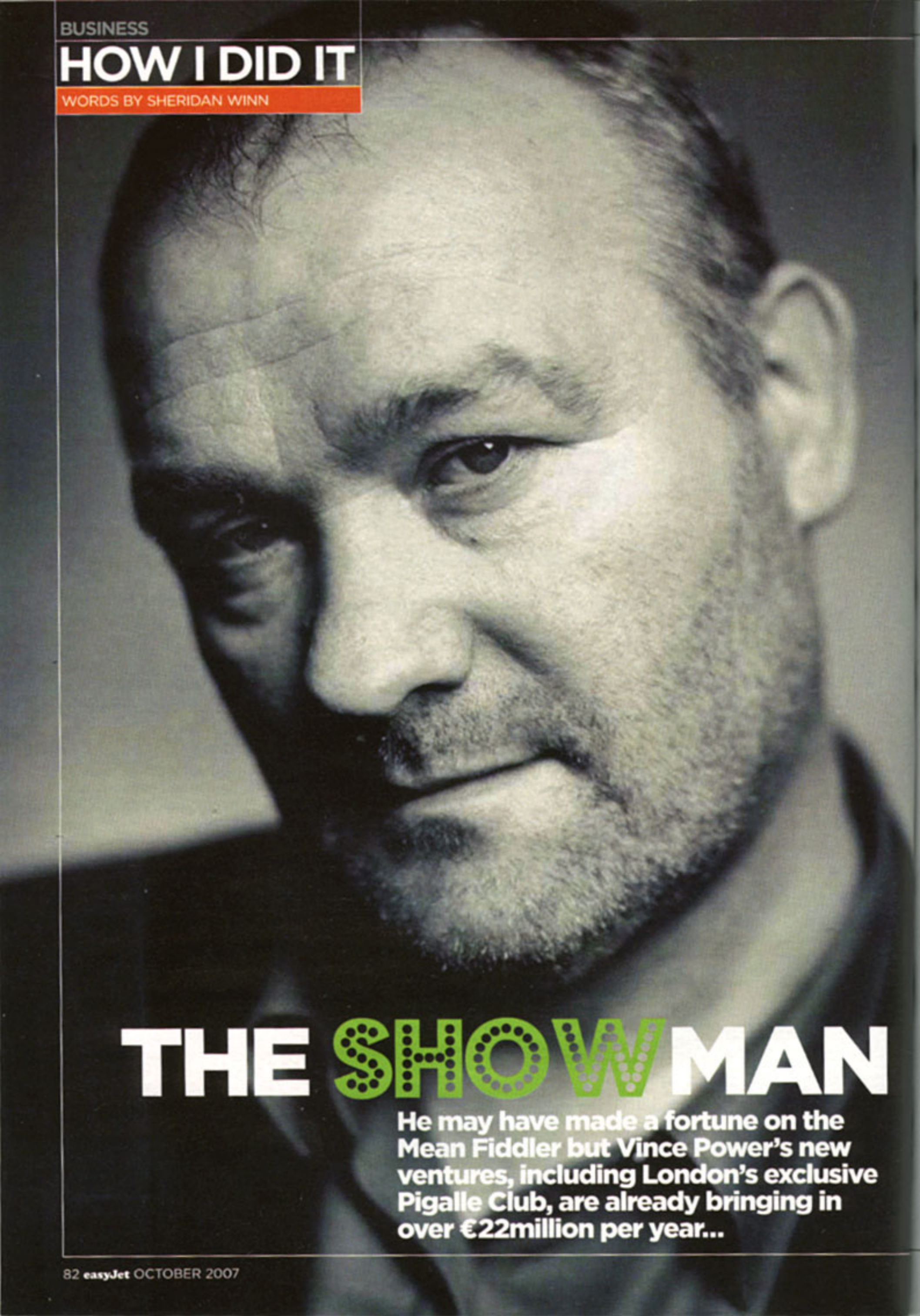
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BUSINESS

HOW I DID IT

WORDS BY SHERIDAN WINN

THE SHOWMAN

He may have made a fortune on the Mean Fiddler but Vince Power's new ventures, including London's exclusive Pigalle Club, are already bringing in over €22million per year...



He is known as 'the godfather of gigs' and is widely considered

the most influential live music promoter in the UK.

Credited with discovering Norah Jones and Tanita Tikaram, this quiet, curmudgeonly Irishman, founder of the Mean Fiddler Group also gave Eminem his first UK gig and was responsible for Justin Timberlake's sell-out tour in 2003. His name is Vince Power, and at 60 years of age he still is just as influential in the music business.

Power founded the Mean Fiddler Group in 1982, taking it to the stock market in 2000, and growing the company dramatically. With size came constraints, however, and in 2005 he sold his final shares in the company. "I'm not a good fit with the City," he says. "The plc discipline is good, but you have to have a board meeting to make any decisions."

When Power walked away the Mean Fiddler had annual sales of around €75m (£50m) and accounted for eight music festivals, 14 live music venues, plus numerous clubs, restaurants and bars. "Not bad for a £100 company started in Harlesden 20 years ago," he laughs. He is a man who thrives on challenge, and he loves the idea that you can win and lose it all. "It's when you are prepared to lose it that you win. Other promoters would offer a band £500,000 and put them second on the bill. I'd offer them £1m and put them first."

With such a thirst for business, Power was never going to leave the music industry totally, and when he left Mean Fiddler he set up VPMG (Vince Power Music Group). Based in Soho, he is busy organising the popular Berkeley Square Ball charity event and aims to develop his popular Italian restaurant, SPIGA, into a chain. Add to that the newly opened art deco Bloomsbury Ballroom and his celebrated 1940s-inspired supper venue The Pigalle Club, and it's easy to see how VPMG is already hitting annual sales of around €22m (£15m).

The third in a family of 11 children, Power grew up in poverty in County Waterford, Ireland. He claims he knew he was different from a young age and was destined to seek his fortune. To his mother's chagrin, he turned down a scholarship to study bovine artificial insemination—and the promise of a secure life—and in



Modern times: *here*, the stage is set at Power's new music venue, The Pigalle Club; *below*, Attic Jam perform live



1963 moved to England. He was 15 years old, a shy, naïve lad. A succession of jobs followed, including factory work, encyclopaedia and bedding sales and demolition work. By the age of 19, Power was married with a child and began to take life very seriously.

On a London demolition site one day he found some old furniture, restored it and sold it by putting a notice in a shop window. He bought a van and in 1970 opened a second-hand furniture shop. His adverts claimed that Power's of Kilburn was the biggest and the best, and by the end of the

Things I wish I'd known before I started

- ▶ I wish I'd looked after my back. As a young man I was strong and lifted a lot of furniture and I suffer for it now.
- ▶ I'd advise my children not to marry an entrepreneur! It doesn't coincide well with domestic life: you are on a permanent adrenaline rush.
- ▶ I wish I hadn't nearly broken the company in 1993: I lost a lot of money in the first year of the Fleadh Mor festival in Ireland.

1970s he owned a successful chain of shops in North London.

He was getting bored, though, and wanted to move into the music business. So, in 1982, he opened the Mean Fiddler in Harlesden, North London, funding it from his furniture business. These days he seldom speaks to bank managers, but when the Mean Fiddler was in its first year, and making very little money his bank manager made him put his house on the line. The slim pickings from that lean first year showed Power that if he wanted a viable business he couldn't just stage the country and western music that he loved. Finally, when he broadened the range of music on offer, the Mean Fiddler really took off.



➔ Within five years, Power was staging stars such as Johnny Cash and Roy Orbison. As

well as gaining a reputation for folk nights thanks to such up-and-coming acts as Billy Bragg and The Pogues, the Mean Fiddler hosted Nick Cave, Eric Clapton, Mark Knopfler, Annie Lennox and promising new bands such as Oasis. And Power no longer depended on his bank manager. "The good thing about the music business and about promoting is that, if you catch it right, it is self-financing," says Power.

By the late 1980s, Power had added a string of clubs and venues to his roster, including London legends the Astoria, the Garage, the Forum, the Jazz Café, the Powerhaus and Subterranea, where Eminem had his first UK gig. The festivals followed, and included the Fleadh, Reading, Leeds and Glastonbury, although it was far from plain sailing. Power describes his first Fleadh festival in Ireland, in 1993, as a "spectacular failure", because despite the stellar line-up—including Van Morrison, Ray Charles and Jerry Lee Lewis—the festival flopped and Power lost €3m (£2m).

He learnt quickly though, and came up with novel ways of making the festivals pay their way. Thinking ahead, Power plans to twin the Benacàssim music festival—a beach-party style festival near Barcelona—with a new festival in Bilbao, repeating his trick of twinning the Leeds festival with Reading to give him greater buying power, and make the whole thing more profitable and practical. Such experience and ingenuity is proving particularly useful at the moment in a music industry facing massive changes to its business model.

"The CD is in terminal decline," he says. "There is less money in recording acts, so bands have to look to live performance, licensing and appearance rights. Record companies want bands for their imagery."

He sees his biggest challenge as trying to guide music industry sponsors towards softer marketing techniques. "It's time for a back-to-basics approach," says Power. "Kids are tired of being branded—texts for this and texts for that. They want a more subtle approach."

He may be a dedicated businessman, but he seems to keep it all in context. He has eight children by three mothers and a huge extended family, and claims they're the only thing that can keep him awake at night. "Apart from too much coffee, it's the family—the stuff that gets under your skin," he says. "Not business: I have a healthy disrespect for business." **easyJet**

My first boss

Ian was my first manager at Woolworths, where I was a trainee in 1963. With my wage I bought a £10 suit and paid it off at 10 shilling per week.

Unfulfilled ambition

I would love to be an actor. I am very shy, but inside there is another person who is totally different.

Best Piece of advice I've been given

I tend to ignore advice, but it would have to be my mother's words to always be respectful to other people. You are no better or worse than anyone else.

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