



ON THE

LIFE AND DEATH NEW YORK DANCE FLOOR

TIM LAWRENCE

1980-1983



More praise for *Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor, 1980–1983*

“Tim Lawrence brings the authority of his deeply sourced disco history *Love Saves the Day* to club culture’s great melting-pot moment, when hip hop, punk, and disco transformed one another, with input from salsa, jazz, and Roland 808s. If you never danced yourself dizzy at the Roxy, the Paradise Garage, or the Mudd Club, here’s a chance to feel the bass and taste the sweat.”

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Praise for *Love Saves the Day*

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“[E]verything a good history should be—accurate, informative, well-organized, and thoughtful. It is also everything a quality read should be—fresh, thoughtful, and provocative. . . . *Love Saves the Day* is, as so many critics have noted, the definitive book on dance music in the 1970s.”

— **LISA NEFF**, *Chicago Free Press*

“*Love Saves the Day* is what we need for generations to come: it’s the real history of dance music and DJ/club culture.”

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“*Love Saves the Day* not only gets dance music history right—it refocuses that history to include those unjustly excluded from it.”

— **ETHAN BROWN**, *New York Magazine*

“[T]his is as close to a definitive account of disco as we’re likely to get, and as entertaining as a great night out.”

— **RICHARD SMITH**, *Gay Times*

“Lawrence’s astounding research and wide focus make this the music’s definitive chronicle so far.”

— **MICHAELANGELO MATOS**, *Seattle Weekly*

“An extraordinarily rich work that ought to transform the ways we write the history of popular music.”

—**MITCHELL MORRIS**, *Journal of Popular Music Studies*

Praise for *Hold On to Your Dreams*

“[T]he most fascinating recount of the unfairly condemned-to-obscure experimental musician. . . . Russell’s unprecedented genre-merging deserves this kind of exploration, and Lawrence approaches with a delicacy and direct intimacy reminiscent of the music itself.”

—*Oxford American*

“With rich and animated detail, Tim Lawrence tracks Arthur Russell’s insatiable drive to integrate so-called serious music and pop. This definitive biography is both an engrossing record of Russell’s musical ambitions and a compelling account of the fertile downtown scene that supported his admirable dreams.”

—**MATT WOLF**, director of *Wild Combination: A Portrait of Arthur Russell*

“A monumental work.” —**KRIS NEEDS**, *Record Collector*

“Lawrence’s writing is up to the task of telling this narrative in a way that makes the pathos of Russell’s life a deeply compelling window onto the ‘Downtown’ music scene of the 1980s and ’90s.”

—**GUSTAVOS STADLER**, *Social Text*

“*Hold on to Your Dreams* sets a new standard for musical biography by virtue of its research methodology and focus on seemingly minor figures. Lawrence makes a strong case for the importance of Russell’s music to our understanding of late-twentieth-century cultural life and, perhaps most importantly, shows the value of historical biography written with an emphasis on musical mediation and social networks.”

—**RYAN DOHONEY**, *Journal of the Society for American Music*

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Tim Lawrence

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PREFACE

Sanity dictated that this book should have told the history of 1980s dance culture in the United States in the way that my first book, *Love Saves the Day*, excavated the 1970s, charting the chaotic renewal of the post-disco party scene in early 1980s New York, the mid-decade rise of Chicago house and Detroit techno, and the culture's end-of-decade decline as its center of gravity shifted to Europe. But sanity failed to anticipate the way the early 1980s would reveal themselves to be one of the most creatively vibrant and socially dynamic periods in the history of New York. Nor did it foresee how those superficially amorphous years contained some kind of coded lesson about creativity, community, and democracy in the global city. So instead of depicting the 1980–1983 period as a mere bridge that connected the big genre stories of 1970s disco and 1980s house and techno, I submitted to its kaleidoscope logic, took my foot off the historical metronome, and decided to *take it*—the book — *to the bridge*.

The truncated time frame didn't exactly make it easier to write this book, in part because the period didn't present an obvious start or endpoint and in part because its modus operandi was one of interaction, openness, and freedom in which everything seemed to be tied to everything and nothing really had a name. Negotiating disco's recent collapse, rap's battle to become more than a passing fad, and punk's aesthetic exhaustion, New Yorkers were so unbothered about defining the culture they were bringing into existence it was left to the British to coin the names of mutant disco and electro, with postpunk popularized later. That left the period appearing to lack an identity as well as the kind of clean-cut generic innovation that can provide an easy anchor for chroniclers and readers alike, while its sandwiching between disco plus house and techno added to its antinarrative personality. When Chicago DJ Frankie Knuckles argued that house music amounted to "disco's revenge," he inadvertently contributed to the idea that the music and culture of the early 1980s

were only of passing consequence. This book aims to show how, at least in New York, revenge wasn't even a conversation topic as the city's party culture entered into what would turn out to be—at least at the time of writing—its most prolific phase.

The 1980–1983 period hasn't remained completely off the radar. Steven Hager's *Art after Midnight*, which charts the artist incursion into the city's club scene, remains the most significant contribution to the historicization of the period. Jeff Chang (*Can't Stop Won't Stop*), Bernard Gendron (*Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club*), Simon Reynolds (*Rip It Up and Start Again*), and Peter Shapiro (*Turn the Beat Around*) have added chapters that explore the way hip hop, postpunk, and mutant disco proliferated in early 1980s New York. Yet while these authors capture a slice of the city's cultural history, their angled approach inevitably slices up an era that was arguably defined by its synergy and its interconnectedness. Although affiliations to certain sounds, venues, and scenes were often real and impassioned, they routinely came second to the broadly accepted idea that the city's party spaces doubled as environments of possibility and community. The challenge has been to write a book that captures the breadth of what happened and the spirit in which it unfolded.

The complexity and interactivity of the New York party scene required this book to adopt a crablike syncretic approach, spending more time moving sideways than forward. The events of each year are presented in four parts, each subdivided into chapters that take on the city's art-punk, post-disco dance, and hip hop party scenes; the music linked to these scenes; the relationship between the culture and the broader music industry; and sociopolitical matters (ranging from city and national government matters to the spread of AIDS). If it wasn't for the two-year gap, this book could almost be the successor to *Love Goes to Buildings on Fire*, Will Hermes's account of the city's music culture of 1973–1977. Yet whereas the disco, punk, and prerecorded rap scenes charted by Hermes remained largely unto themselves, *Life and Death* explores their meeting and synthesis during the opening years of the 1980s, with each chapter being semipermeable. In short, the party culture of the early 1980s is of interest not in spite of its lack of generic clarity but because its itinerant leanings opened up so many social and sonic possibilities. This book places the era's indiscipline at the center rather than the margins.

In keeping with the nebulous quality of its scenes and sounds, the 1980–1983 period doesn't have a clear start and endpoint. The turn toward mutation can, for instance, be traced to Dinosaur's "Kiss Me Again," Cristina's "Disco Clone," and the opening of the Mudd Club, all of which unfolded during the

autumn of 1978. At the other end of the time frame, venues such as Danceteria and the Paradise Garage entered 1984 in something akin to full flow while Strafe's "Set It Off" traveled between the city's venues in a manner that suggested that interscene records could make their mark just so long as the beat combination was right. Yet it remains the case that disco continued to hog the story of party culture during 1979, even if many of the headlines were turning negative, and it was only during 1980, after the majors shifted into post-backlash retrenchment mode and the national media lost interest in disco, that the shift into a mongrel era became explicit. Similarly, 1983 amounted to a tipping point in the city's history as AIDS reached epidemic proportions while the influences of real estate inflation and Wall Street began to climb exponentially. The continuation of those trends, the onset of the crack epidemic, and the reelection of Ronald Reagan during 1984 marked the beginning of a much more conflictual and divisive era that turned records like "Set It Off" into a rarity.

Somewhat regrettably, this book restricts its coverage to New York, but if anything the city was even more dominant during the early 1980s than it had been during the 1970s, when Boston, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and San Francisco fed much more heavily into party culture—including New York party culture. Of the urban centers omitted, San Francisco supported a vibrant yet somewhat isolated white gay scene and not a great deal more, so it is referenced primarily in relation to the way some of its independent label recordings traveled eastward. Although Chicago remains significant thanks to the run of Frankie Knuckles at the Warehouse between 1977 and 1983, its party scene exerted no significant influence on other cities during this period (with house emerging in 1984 and breaking out a year later). Elsewhere, Detroit supported a significantly less developed local scene than Chicago and an equally limited national profile, while Philadelphia existed as a shadow of its former self, its towering musical output of the 1960s and 1970s dramatically diminished. Newark's impact was more marked, largely because of Zanzibar, and is discussed in the pages that follow, as are some of the important transatlantic links established with the United Kingdom, particularly Manchester. Yet it remains the case that during the opening years of the 1980s, New Yorkers had fewer reasons to track external developments than at any time in recent memory. Their own productivity provided added reason to stay put.

Life and Death aims to contribute to the "archive of the ephemeral" evoked by the late José Muñoz, for while some art and most recordings survive in material form, many efforts—DJ sets, band performances, theatrical explorations, immersive happenings, fashion shows, dance styles, and graffiti/xerox/

found-object art efforts—assumed a transient form.¹ As well as describing and acknowledging this other strand of creativity, the pages that follow seek to shape a form of collective memory that foregrounds what Judith Halberstam describes as “the self-understandings of cultural producers.”² They do so by drawing heavily on interviews and email conversations with some 130 participants (interviews are conducted by myself unless otherwise referenced) as well as the vibrant, sometimes urgent accounts of contemporaneous writers, including Vince Aletti, Brian Chin, Nelson George, Richard Grabel, Steven Hager, Steven Harvey, Robert Palmer, John Rockwell, and Stephen Saban, plus neglected yet invaluable sources such as *Dance Music Report*, the *East Village Eye*, and the *New York Rocker*, respectively edited by Tom Silverman, Leonard Abrams, and Andy Schwartz.

If a guiding concept runs through this book it lies in Henri Lefebvre’s description of the ideal city as “the perpetual *oeuvre* of the inhabitants, themselves mobile and mobilized for and by this *oeuvre*,” where a “superior form of rights” emerges: the “right to freedom, to individualization in socialization, to habitat and to inhabit.”³ Did New York’s inhabitants realize themselves in such a way during the early 1980s? The portents weren’t promising, given that their city is widely assumed to have collapsed during the 1970s, with the fiscal crisis, deteriorating public services, and rising crime rates pummeling its inhabitants. But although the ride was often bumpy, and although certain problems appeared endemic, New York entered the new decade with its public services operational and its debt manageable. Rarely referenced, President Ford delivered a \$2.3 billion loan soon after the *New York Post* reported him telling the city to drop dead, real estate values dipped yet never collapsed, heroin use was far less ubiquitous than is routinely implied, the murder rate barely rose between 1971 and 1979, and muggers were frequently greeted with the comment “Sorry, I haven’t got any money,” recalls downtown actor Patti Astor. With the cultural renaissance already gathering momentum, the city was set for an explosion of creative activity that came to be distinguished by its participatory nature as well as the ability of those involved to reinvent themselves and their surroundings.

Although the primary task of this book is to chronicle the relentless activity of the era, it is also concerned with the policies that were introduced to combat the perceived failure of the 1970s. These included reductions in government spending and welfare, the deregulation of the banking sector, tax cuts for the wealthy, and the introduction of additional tax breaks to stimulate corporate investment in the city. Conservatives argued that such measures were necessary to revive the city, pointing to garbage piled high on the sidewalks, citizens

supposedly afraid to step out of their front doors, and graffiti that overran the subway system. But while life in New York undoubtedly produced its discomforts and its hairy moments, the New Yorkers I spoke to recounted to a person that even if city life caused occasional trepidation, they felt more anxious about what they would miss if they had to leave the city for a few days, with Ronald Reagan's trigger-happy references to nuclear war their greatest political concern. It was only during 1983 that another set of more anxiety-inducing fears started to take shape as real estate inflation began to rocket, rents started their mountainous climb, and Wall Street headed skyward, which conspired to transform the city into a less democratic space. That year AIDS also reached epidemic proportions, with crack consumption spiraling out of control the following year, scaring the shit out of participants and decimating communities. Lefebvre's moment began to recede, even if memories of what had just passed would sustain his ideals.

This book makes three core arguments. First, New York experienced a community-driven cultural renaissance during the early 1980s that stands as one of the most influential in its, and perhaps in any city's, history. Second, the renaissance was rooted in opportunities that came to the fore during New York's shift from industrialism to postindustrialism, and it began to unravel when New York assumed the character of a neoliberal city organized around finance capital, gentrification, real estate inflation, and social regulation. Third, although party culture is routinely denigrated as a source of mindless hedonism and antisocial activity, it revealed its social, cultural, and even economic potential during the period examined here. None of this means that early 1980s New York achieved some kind of utopia. After all, day-to-day life came with its struggles, integration might have moved faster and gone further, and participants became embroiled in their fair share of falling outs, betrayals, and rivalries. With the benefit of hindsight, it can also be argued that a certain naïveté—a collective belief that conditions would always remain favorable—underpinned much if by no means all of the activity. Then again, a careful examination of the early 1980s also confirms that valuable freedoms have diminished since the city entered the neoliberal era. Given that corporations received heavy subsidies to set up shop in the first place, and given that so many of them have subsequently pioneered ways of minimizing their tax bill, this history also begs the question: what might have happened if a different path had been chosen?

Caveats apply, beginning with the standard acknowledgment that much of this history relies on recollections that can only be filtered through the present and are to varying degrees partial. If "some memories are hazy," as

David DePino, a close friend of Larry Levan, the DJ at the Paradise Garage, puts it, conscious of the wear-and-tear that late-night living can cause, it remains the case that hindsight brings its own rewards, while the value of capturing the memories of those who are still around is surely highlighted by the passing of so many protagonists (among them Levan). Because the story of a person can never be fully re-created, it follows that the portraits developed here will inevitably appear slim, yet the broad intention is to show how the multitude of participants, the overwhelming majority unnamed, helped create and in return received sustenance from a towering scene. Introducing another qualification, although a significant proportion of the material introduced is original, some aspects will inevitably be familiar to readers. Rather than leave out the era's better-known DJs or parties or recordings, the plan is to convey them with fresh detail and insight.

As for this book's title, the reference to life is intended to evoke the way that New York party culture didn't merely survive the hyped death of disco but positively flourished in its wake. If the backlash held sway in the suburbs of the United States as well as the music corporations that gauged success according to national sales, the sense of possibility, opportunity, and exploration remained palpable for those who experienced the culture via the city's private parties and public discotheques. As for the evocation of death, the primary reference is to AIDS, which devastated the queer population that contributed so powerfully to the city's party scene, with heroin users and others also embroiled. Death also refers to the reorganization of the city around a neoliberal ethos that has ultimately resulted in the radical curtailment (if not total eradication) of its party culture.

In some respects this book is written as an outtake of Jane Jacobs's monumental work *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, which describes the organic interactions that were the stuff of city life and the way in which grandiose planners could suffocate such activity. At the same time it acknowledges Sharon Zukin's observation that the greatest threat to mixed-income communities lies not in the activities of planners but in the relentless march of gentrification, the breakneck rise of housing as an investment opportunity, and the shift toward a deregulated and globalized economy that has accelerated these developments.⁴ The clampdown on party culture has taken place in the interests of the few rather than the many, who no longer have the opportunity to engage in the kind of democratic art and music culture that was once integral to Manhattan. "I believe that nightclubs are these terribly important places where all kinds of things happen," argues dominatrix doorwoman, barwoman, promoter, performer, and self-described "nightclub

utopian” Chi Chi Valenti. “They’re kind of underrated, but if you look at the things that have been formed and born in clubs, especially but not only in New York, the results are extraordinary.”

One small hope carried through this book is that its detailing of the city’s recent past can suggest what it might become again.

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This is the third time I have found myself immersed in the act of “community history writing,” as a friend and colleague recently described my books. The work is both collective and interactive, with a chorus of a hundred-plus voices that made a scene enabling this particular narration. All manner of thanks are due.

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INTRODUCTION

New Year's Eve 1979 carried the promise of a break with a decade marked by defeat in Vietnam, the Watergate scandal, the first recession of the postwar era, an ongoing hostage crisis in Iran, and the culture most heavily associated with the 1970s — disco. Polls conducted during the year indicated that only 19 percent of U.S. citizens were satisfied with the country's direction while trust in government hit a record low of 29 percent, crashing from a 1967 peak of 76 percent.¹ Public confidence suffered some more in October when the Federal Reserve tightened monetary supply in order to curb the spiraling inflation that accompanied weakening economic growth, which fell from more than 6 percent to under 2 percent during the year. Then, on 31 December, the *New York Times* reported that “the much heralded recession is starting fitfully.”² Sages read the national mood and announced that it called for belt-tightening, hard work, and a reassertion of traditional values. It had become, in short, a bad time to discuss the pleasures of the dance floor with one's bank manager.

New York Magazine captured the zeitgeist in its 31 December issue. “The media have already been at work defining it all,” ran the introductory piece. “The key words seem to be ‘Me,’ ‘Self,’ ‘Disco,’ ‘Woody Allen,’ ‘Third World,’ ‘Liberation (usually women's possibly anybody's),’ ‘Cocaine,’ ‘Style,’ and, above all, ‘Energy.’”³ The publication noted that the words could be joined together, so a “shortage of energy” could be “relieved by cocaine,” which could provide “the strength to dance the night away,” with disco movie star John Travolta “dancing with a degree of self-absorption that would glaze over the eyes of Narcissus” in *Saturday Night Fever*.⁴ The magazine positioned the 1970s as “the decade of the last free ride” and forecast that the 1980s would “find us paying our dues for the debts and obligations we took on during the 1970s.”⁵ It also suggested that the anonymous Studio 54 dancer who said “this is as near to heaven as I'll ever get” might have been right, because the 1980s didn't look

as though they were “going to be that much fun.”⁶ It didn’t seem to matter that *New York Magazine* had published the semifictional article that inspired the making of *Saturday Night Fever* in the first place. The time had come to rein in consumption, cut down on the partying, and lie on a bed of nails.

None of the talk would have discouraged hardened revelers from heading out to a subterranean party scene that bore only a passing resemblance to the flashier side of disco. At the Loft, musical host David Mancuso selected a panoramic range of danceable sounds for a crowd that had frequented his spot since the beginning of 1970. At Better Days, DJ Toraino “Tee” Scott delivered a blend of soul, funk, R&B, and disco that lured his black gay followers into the timeless flow of the rhythm section. At Flamingo and 12 West, DJs Howard Merritt, Richie Rivera, and Robbie Leslie played to a white gay crowd that had helped set disco in motion before side-stepping its commercial conclusion. At the Paradise Garage, DJ Larry Levan created a tapestry that lay somewhere between the range of Mancuso and the steady drive of Scott. At Club 57 and the Mudd Club, Dany Johnson, David Azarch, Johnny Dynell, and Anita Sarko selected funk, new wave, no wave, punk, R&B, and sometimes even disco in between offerings that included live bands, art, immersive happenings, participatory theater, and experimental film. Meanwhile Disco Fever, located up in the Bronx, presented DJ and MC combinations that worked the floor by mixing disco, funk, and the nascent sound of rap. Giving up the ritual wasn’t even a consideration.

The culture continued to thrive because the conditions that had led DJ-ing to take root in New York in the first place remained largely unchanged. The city housed the highest concentration of gay men, people of color, and women in the United States, if not the world, and just as these groups had joined forces with miscellaneous others to conquer, recalibrate, and properly ignite the withering discotheque scene during the early 1970s, so they continued at the beginning of the new decade, because going out to party had become a way of life. The music industry’s historic presence in the city had also helped it become the national capital for disco and new wave, with musicians encouraged to migrate to the city in the knowledge that they would enjoy a better-than-average chance of making a go of it if they played and recorded there. Usually broke, musicians were able to pursue this kind of dream because real estate remained cheap, thanks to the impact of deindustrialization, the flight of the white middle class to the suburbs, and the city’s mid-decade nosedive into bankruptcy.

New York remained raw and ardent. Rolled out during the second half of the 1970s, budget cuts placed the city’s services under such severe strain

they were still deteriorating as the new decade got under way. More murders, robberies, and burglaries were recorded in 1980 than in any year since records began forty-nine years earlier; subway breakdowns rose from 30,000 in 1977 to 71,700; and the city's public schools lagged far behind their private counterparts.⁷ Meanwhile a significant element of the housing stock went up in smoke as landlords ran down decrepit buildings before resorting to arson, aware they could often make more money from insurance than by renting to low-earning tenants. During 1979 alone, close to ten thousand premeditated blazes raged through the city, with almost half of them occurring in occupied buildings. "Arson is the cremation ritual of a diseased housing system," lamented the *Village Voice* in June 1980. "In housing, the final stage of capitalism is arson."⁸ With heroin dealing taking root in the Lower East Side, it was no wonder that some believed the city amounted to a study in nihilism, as was the case with punk vocalist Lydia Lunch, who described it as a "filthy specter" constructed out of "blood-soaked bones."⁹

There were times, however, when the doomsday headlines failed to capture the city's openness, communality, and durability. Even though friends had warned her that the Lower East Side was so dangerous nobody would visit, for instance, the Cincinnati-raised downtown movie actor Patti Astor discovered the area to be "actually quite pastoral, with firmly established Russian, Italian and Hispanic communities" when she moved into a dirt-cheap three bedroom walk-up on East 10th Street and Second Avenue.¹⁰ The ceiling fell in at her next apartment, on 3rd Street between Second Avenue and the Bowery, but that, she says, was nothing, and it also gave her a reason to not pay the rent. "We just ran wild in the streets, wearing our little outfits," reminisces Astor. "We all lived in these *horrible* little apartments so we really didn't want to stay inside, and we kind of made that whole neighborhood one big playground. The parents were gone." Even the threat of violence usually ended in a slapstick standoff. "Being stuck up by somebody with a knife wasn't that big of a deal," she adds. "They'd go, 'Give me your money!' And we'd reply, 'We don't *have* any money! Why do you think we're out on the *same street?!*' Then the guy would go, 'Oh, okay. Here, have a cigarette.' For real." Only the Alphabets, as the alphabetized avenues at the eastern end of the Lower East Side were known, were deemed to be out of bounds (thanks to the local heroin trade).

Creativity flourished under these conditions. "It was a time when people could literally pay \$100 a month in rent and there was a tremendous freedom to that," argues Chi Chi Valenti, a native New Yorker and party animal who shared a \$400-per-month loft on 14th Street with three roommates. "They

didn't have to have a career. There was a great fluidity." Getting by with very little money, Valenti and her peers flocked to the Odessa, a cheap diner located on Avenue A and St. Mark's Place, as well as the ubiquitous ethnic cafés and restaurants of the East Village, where the enormous plates of food could suffice for a day. Those who got to know the door staff of downtown's clubs gained free entry and often free drinks. Transport couldn't have been cheaper because everyone walked everywhere. "It's amazing how little we needed," adds Valenti, whose uniformed outfits, severe aura, and dominant personality made her a recognizable presence. "That was terribly important."

Taking shape after creative workers flooded into Lower Manhattan during the 1960s and 1970s, the downtown art scene coexisted with the clandestine end of the city's party network. The experimental Kitchen Center for Video and Music operated out of the Mercer Street Arts Center, which was situated around the corner from Mancuso's first Loft on Broadway and Bleeker Street. Paula Cooper's gallery on 96 Prince Street, the first of its kind when it opened in SoHo in 1968, became neighbors with the second incarnation of the Loft when Mancuso moved to number 99. Leo Castelli, the most influential dealer in American contemporary art, opened a gallery at 420 West Broadway in SoHo in 1971, little more than a hop, skip, and jump away from Nicky Siano's second Gallery, a Loft-style venue located on Mercer Street and Houston. La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club had already been running on East 4th Street for twelve years when future punk hangout CBGB set up shop at nearby 315 Bowery. Students from the School of Visual Arts on East 23rd Street were happy to make the short hike to Club 57 on St. Mark's Place. And the Performing Garage, home of the experimental theater group the Wooster Group, turned out to be a twelve-minute saunter from the Paradise Garage, located at 84 King Street. With so much at their doorsteps, downtowners rarely felt the need to leave.

Negotiating streets that were still unlit at night, artists, actors, choreographers, composers, dancers, DJs, musicians, performance artists, theater directors, video filmmakers, and writers tended to collaborate and socialize within discrete groups at first, drawn to those who shared their vocabulary. Yet whether they ended up living in an expansive loft in SoHo or a run-down tenement in the East Village, the density of their living arrangements, the sheer level of their activity, and the shared desire to make a stand led the divergent strands of this definitively postindustrial generation to come into increasing contact, and from the mid-1970s onward a constellation's worth of meetings and collaborations began to unfold. "Artists worked in multiple media, and collaborated, criticized, supported, and valued each other's works

in a way that was unprecedented,” argues archivist and critic Marvin J. Taylor in *The Downtown Book*. “Rarely has there been such a condensed and diverse group of artists in one place at one time, all sharing many of the same assumptions about how to make new art.”¹¹

Locales such as the Broome Street Bar (on Broome Street), Fanelli’s Bar (on 94 Prince Street), the One Fifth (at 1 Fifth Avenue), Phoebes (on the corner of 4th Street and the Bowery), Raoul’s (on 180 Prince Street), and the Spring Street bar (on Spring Street) encouraged the interaction. “Personally, I loved Phoebes,” recalls composer and musician Garrett List, who worked as music director of the Kitchen between 1975 and 1977, where he made it his business to introduce downtown loft jazz musicians into the schedule. “It was a kind of inter-disciplinary bar (avant la lettre) with a weird kind of mix: the black new jazz thing, actors and theater people, poets and white avant-garde musicians.” Meanwhile, Max’s Kansas City (on Park Avenue South and 17th Street) followed by CBGB (on the Bowery) introduced experimental rock into the mix, with the latter becoming a key hangout after the closure of the Mercer Street Arts Center pushed a bunch of proto-punk bands into its midst. Then, as the decade reached its denouement, the scene began to motor as Hurrah opened as the first rock discotheque, the Mudd Club followed by Club 57 mixed DJ-ing with various forms of performance, and the Paradise Garage opened as an expanded version of the Loft and the Gallery. By the time the clocks struck midnight on 31 December 1979, then, revelers could survey the downtown scene and conclude that the cross-fertilizing energy was, if anything, about to intensify. “Downtown was like this kaleidoscopic, smörgåsbord of activity,” recalls party organizer and performance artist Ann Magnuson. “All of these ideas were out there. It was like Halloween every night.”

The beginning of the new decade bore uncanny similarities to the beginning of the last. As before, New York faced deep-seated economic challenges, with austerity matching the earlier challenge of white flight and spiraling debt. Both junctures were also marked by foreign-policy emergencies that undermined the country’s global authority as the ongoing Iran hostage crisis dominated the headlines in a manner reminiscent of Vietnam. In another parallel, conservatives lambasted the perceived moral excesses of both outgoing decades, with the counterculture followed by disco blamed for cultivating hedonistic practices that undermined productivity as well as the social order. The game of parallels even extended to discotheque culture, which experienced its first crash when the twist along with rock and roll crashed out of fashion toward the end of the 1960s, only to experience an even more dramatic collapse when the backlash against disco peaked in 1979. Just as

commercial tendencies had corroded the core values of the counterculture a decade earlier, so a form of insidious commercialism undermined disco from within after it outsold rock during 1978.

Revelers old enough to remember the ebbs and flows of the previous decade still had good reason to be cheerful. Just as the disintegration of the first wave of flashbulb discotheque culture paved the way for an organic alternative to take root at the Loft and the Sanctuary, where David Mancuso and Francis Grasso, respectively, selected records as if they were engaging in a democratic conversation rather than delivering a disjointed rant, so the domino collapse of the join-the-dots discotheques that had opened in the slipstream of *Saturday Night Fever* signaled the beginning of a period that would see venues such as Danceteria, the Funhouse, Pyramid, the Roxy, the Saint, and even Studio 54 reenergize the night. If the spluttering economy at both ends of the 1970s meant that money was often scarce, party promoters could also find affordable spaces with relative ease while locals viewed dancing as a cheap and cathartic form of entertainment. Finally, just as the opening of the 1970s heralded a period of social and sonic openness, when people and sounds came together in ways previously unimagined, so the same would come to pass during the early 1980s.

Four key differences would also take effect, beginning with the city's party infrastructure, which amounted to a spent force on New Year's Eve 1969 as discotheque audiences dwindled following the exhaustion of the twist craze and the rise of countercultural alternatives, after which Mancuso turned his home into a private party that came to be known as the Loft and two West Village gay bar owners who went by the names of Seymour and Shelley revived a stuttering public discotheque known as the Sanctuary. That, more or less, was that, with alternative destinations few and far between during the opening months of 1970. Yet New Yorkers who headed out on New Year's Eve 1979 were spoiled for choice, at least in Manhattan, where dance venues continued to thrive in spite of the wider backlash against disco. Moreover, in stark contrast to the decade's beginning, when companies were oblivious to the dance storm that was about to unfold, the cluster of independent labels that had emerged to serve the party scene remained operational, albeit chastened and somewhat slimmer. Whereas 1970 marked the beginning of a story, 1980 represented its complex, multidirectional continuation.

Second, the geographic origins of the music played in the city's party spaces shifted markedly between 1970 and 1980. Back in the very early 1970s, for instance, first-generation DJs scoured record bins in search of viable music that, when they checked the publishing details, usually came from Detroit or

Philadelphia. As the decade gathered pace, however, a series of New York-based independents began to service the city's selectors with R&B-oriented disco grooves; CBGB became the incubator for a breakthrough generation of punk and new wave bands; venues such as Artists Space, the Kitchen, and Tier 3 provided a platform for the no wave lineups that succeeded them; and Bronx-based DJs and MCs inspired the first cluster of rap releases. Thanks to these developments, New York DJs found themselves drawing on a rising proportion of locally produced records as they became the midwives of the disco boom, and both they and the companies that had invested in the city's buoyant musical networks were keen to maintain the flow after disco veered into an aesthetic cul-de-sac at the decade's tumultuous close. Far more evolved than anything that had existed ten years earlier, the city's independent labels were all set to explore new combinations in dance.

Third, the soundscape went through a triple somersault that played havoc with notions of marketing as well as form. With party DJs taking three or four years to establish their promotional worth, disco's rise out of funk, soul, and R&B was such a subtle affair that label heads and journalists didn't agree that a new genre had come into being until 1974. However, once disco had been established, and once punk started to make itself heard a couple of years later, record labels switched up the gears as they threw their know-how into selling the sounds as competing, discrete, and in many respects inverse phenomena. The strategy lasted until disco nosedived in tandem with the U.S. economy during 1979, and with punk and new wave having failed to convert their early promise into major sales, and with the late-arriving sound of rap widely judged to be a passing fad, all calculations pointed to the same conclusion: the beat was set to change as its creators sought out subtler, more imaginative ways to engage audiences that paid much less attention to genre and etiquette. "If the music was good and people connected to the conversation you were musically having with them, they didn't give a toss if you took a sharp left or paused or stopped or generally messed with their heads," Mudd Club DJ Anita Sarko notes of the parallel shift in listening habits. "They welcomed it!" Mutation, convergence, and freedom were about to define the night.

Fourth, the national political climate appeared to be more conducive at the beginning of 1980 than it had been ten years earlier. Inaugurated in January 1969, President Nixon presided over the bombing of Cambodia, the failed assault on Vietnam, and the beginning of a recession as songs such as "War" by Edwin Starr, "Black Skin Blue Eyed Boys" by the Equals, "What's Going On" by Marvin Gaye, and "Back Stabbers" by the O'Jays fed into a culture of protest. Ten years later, Carter presided over a slowing economy yet engineered

several international peace initiatives, including the Camp David Israeli-Egyptian peace agreement and the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks II accord. Rather than attack perceived international threats, Carter headed so far in the other direction he appeared ineffectual as he struggled to find a solution to the Iran hostage crisis, which broke in November 1979. Leftists criticized Carter for initiating a program of deregulation and for achieving little in terms of wealth redistribution, but at least he wasn't a warmonger, and at the beginning of 1980 he also stood at 62 percent in the polls, comfortably ahead of Republican candidate Ronald Reagan, who lagged at 33 percent.¹² Reagan would sweep the November election and haul the country into a decade marked by inequality and polarization. But before that the national outlook looked benign and set to continue.

Come January, then, as journalists pondered the need for atonement and the economy veered toward recession, partygoers continued an odyssey already begun, greeting the night as a hallowed time when they could immerse themselves in an alternative milieu. Drawn to DJs who selected a wide spectrum of sounds, and often heading to venues where creativity and community flourished hand-in-hand, they headed out because the city's party spaces seemed to operate as sites of progress and pleasure. Also wary of the commercialism that had blunted disco's edge, participants weren't in a hurry to name their activity. A new kind of freedom was set to rule the night.

NOTES

PREFACE

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2. Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 169.
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