LIFE AND DEATH ON THE NEW YORK DANCE FLOOR

1980–1983

TIM LAWRENCE

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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"[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."
—LOUIE VEGA, DJ/producer, Masters At Work & Nuyorican Soul

"*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-obscurity 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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unknown, Grace Jones, and Fab 5 Freddy at the Fun Gallery, ca. 1983;
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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 Bleecker 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.

PART I

1980

THE RECALIBRATION OF DISCO

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1

STYLISTIC COHERENCE DIDN'T MATTER AT ALL

Born in 1942, Steve Mass grew up in Macon, Georgia, the oldest son of Chicagoan-Jewish parents, his physician father head of the only radiology department in town. His childhood was a privileged one, yet the presence of a church on every block reminded him that he was an outsider, his interest in the arts provoked jeers at school, and visits to the country club, where his parents were required to socialize with other local notables, many of them with southern aristocratic roots and golf panache to spare, left him convinced of his inferiority. For a while he didn't even know that half the local population was African Americans, so severe was the separation between whites and blacks, but he got to spend time in the same room as African Americans — albeit a segregated one — when he began to head to concerts held in downtown Macon with his closest school friend, Phil Walden, who went on to found Capricorn Records and spearhead the development of southern rock. The experience of seeing the likes of Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley, James Brown, and Little Richard virtually levitate before his eyes was formative. Thanks to his father's line of work, Mass already knew about the steady stream of unsolved murders that were clearly related to Ku Klux Klan activities, and he came to regard these performers as heroes, conscious that when he and other teenagers screamed during their shows, the Klan judged that to be "dangerous."

Mass studied anthropology at Northwestern and creative writing at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, after which he moved to New York to forge ahead with a publishing venture initiated with a Ceylonese aristocrat, determined to take the artistic-curatorial-business pathway because "there was no hope in those days" of earning a living from art. The city was so cheap he launched a printing press in SoHo for "virtually nothing," only to see the venture founder, following his decision to organize it around a wondrous yet inefficient 1938 printing press. He bounced back with a business that provided an out-of-hours

ambulance service to the membership of a large medical insurance company, which enabled him "to see how the city really worked" when he stepped into one of his adapted vans to cover for a sick driver. With no daytime responsibilities and a significant level of freedom at night, given that he could coordinate his business via two-way radio, he also started to pursue his poetic passions, assisting underground cinema pioneer Jack Smith on "a few small films," hanging out with punk director Amos Poe when the opportunity arose, and purchasing a 16mm Frezzolini camera so he could film bands at CBGB, the down-and-out (yet very in) Bowery venue where punk and new wave acts such as Blondie, the Ramones, Talking Heads, and Television had built a following. When New York descended into semi-anarchy during the summertime electricity blackout of 1977, he headed out with his camera to capture "the explosive social ramifications of the machine stopping."

Mass edged deeper into the city's subterranean theater when Poe introduced him to Anya Phillips, a Taiwanese-born designer, dominatrix, ex–Times Square stripper, and art-punk scenester. "Anya had a little circle of friends," he recalls. "They were all designers, they were working with spandex, they were wearing stiletto heels. All of this fascinated me. I was interested in Anya more than the bands." It was through Phillips that Mass also became friends with Diego Cortez, an Illinois-raised artist, performer, and fledgling filmmaker who immersed himself in the SoHo art scene until lead singer David Byrne invited him to see Talking Heads play live at CBGB. "I was brought into another scene that I thought was more vital than my own," reasons Cortez, known as Jim Curtis before he moved to New York. "The conceptual art scene of the 1970s was radical but it was a little bit too much removed from reality for my taste." On-off roommates, Cortez and Phillips were happy to spend time with Mass. "Steve would take Anya and I to dinner and we would hang out a bit," remembers Cortez. "He was one of the few people who had any money in the scene we were part of."

When Cortez directed a "schizo documentary" about Elvis that interspersed the story of the artist's time serving in the U.S. military in Germany with the trials of the country's militant Red Army Faction, he cast himself in the part of Elvis, handed Phillips the role of Priscilla, and brought in Mass to take on the role of cinematographer. The project took them to Memphis, where they drove in one of Mass's vans in order to film outside Graceland, Presley's mansion home, where fans were gathering in the wake of the artist's death on 16 August. After that they took a long route back via Chicago, because Cortez and Phillips had started to toy with the idea of setting up an alternative to CBGB and Max's that would mix live music with DJ-ing, performance art, and exhibitions, and having proposed the idea to Mass on the road to Memphis,

Anya Phillips and Diego Cortez, ca. 1978–1979. Photograph by Jimmy DeSana; courtesy of the Jimmy DeSana Trust.

they wanted to show him a trailblazing punk discotheque called La Mere Vipere located on North Halstead Street that could provide them with a reference point. The experience of seeing some fifty punks thrashing about in black made an impression on Mass, as did the shattered skylight that was positioned above the DJ booth. "I saw the urban terrain as consisting of all these eruptions and moral panics and riots," he recalls. "I thought, 'If neighbors were throwing bricks through the window, then these people must be doing something right.'" Mass confirmed later that the visit "inspired" him and had a "strong influence" on his decision to open a club.[1]

Three factors tempered the southerner's enthusiasm. First, he didn't have any spare money. Second, he still hoped to make it as a filmmaker. Third, the tumultuous events of the summer, which also saw David "Son of Sam"

Berkowitz terrorize New Yorkers, left him feeling cautious because "everything was going wrong." Yet the commotion also coincided with his growing interest in Situationist philosophy and in particular Guy Debord's call in *Society of the Spectacle* for citizens to overturn the commodification of social life by constructing "situations" that re-ordered life, politics, and art.[2] At the same time he calculated that Jack Smith's skill at transforming a ramshackle cast into an expressive community could be partially replicated in a club situation. A self-described loner in search of a community, Mass concluded that the idea of opening a venue for "the moral panic crowd" rippled with potential.

The plan to open an art-punk discotheque remained speculative until Mass and Phillips hit on a dilapidated textile warehouse owned by artist Ross Bleckner, located at 77 White Street, a dead-end part of town that nevertheless lay at the hub of a series of discrete yet vital neighborhoods. To the north, SoHo had come to host the greatest artistic migration the country had ever seen. To the northeast, CBGB remained the choice destination for punks and new wavers. To the east and southeast, industrial Chinatown loomed large. To the south, the New York Metropolitan Correctional Center and New York City Hall hovered with authoritative intent. And to the west, TriBeCa, so called because it formed a triangle below Canal Street, hosted loft happenings that dated back to the early 1960s. "The whole 'science of location' idea — I threw that out of the window," recalls Mass. "I wanted a place that dragged along the bottom of the urban ocean. Whatever it picked up in its net I would deposit in this space." The prospective owner didn't mind that the building had no distinguishing features, drawn as he was to its industrial character as well as its status as an "appendage coming off the city hall and port system." When Bleckner expressed concerns about Mass's proposal, Cortez, who happened to be an ex-tenant of Bleckner's, reassured him that the venue would feature low-key experimental performances and most definitely not "constantly loud music." Mollified, Bleckner offered Mass a lease.

That spring Mass sold a house he owned in Massachusetts in order to raise a shoestring refurbishment budget of $15,000; Phillips became involved with James Chance, founder of the Contortions, which together with DNA, Mars, and Teenage Jesus and the Jerks had started to break with punk and new wave to forge a disruptive and deconstructive sound; and Cortez worked on his Elvis documentary, edited a *Private Elvis* book, and semimanaged some of the bands that had also impressed Phillips, drawn to the way they were "doing something more extreme" than the CBGB breakthrough lineups that had landed contracts with Sire.[3] "Those bands all had a strong concept," recalls Chance. "They had a look, an image of what they wanted to be, and that im-

Steve Mass and Diego Cortez, Lower East Side, 1978. Cortez first headed to CBGB following an invite from Talking Heads guitarist and lead singer David Byrne. Photograph by and courtesy of Bobby Grossman ©.

pressed me, but they were all using the same old rock and roll chord changes. None of them were taking it any further than the Velvet Underground or the Stooges — in fact they were more conservative — and none of them had an overt black influence."

Raised in Milwaukee, where he studied piano at a conservatory before switching to sax, Chance moved to New York because "that was just the place to go to make it in jazz," but he quickly gave up on the loft jazz scene because its white hipster and hippie contingents annoyed him too much. Instead he gravitated to CBGB and Max's, where he met Cortez, who encouraged him to explore punk, which led him to join Lydia Lunch's Teenage Jesus and the Jerks until Lunch kicked him out because his sax was wrecking her minimalist aesthetic. Chance responded by founding the Contortions, a James Brown–inspired outfit with added atonality and sax solos that debuted in December

1977 and played at an *X Magazine* benefit held in an East 4th Street hall the following March. "All these people started sitting and crouching on the floor, and it made me go crazy because that's what all those people did in the jazz lofts," he recalls. "That was the first time I attacked people in the audience." Phillips had looked right through Chance the first time he tried to talk to her but now approached him. "We ended up hanging out for two days straight," he reminisces. "Soon after she started talking about this club idea. Steve was the money man and Anya was going to be the manager."

A short while later, a mutual friend told Cortez that Brian Eno — cofounder of Roxy Music, producer for David Bowie, and composer of the landmark ambient album *Discreet Music* — was traveling to New York on 23 April to master the Talking Heads album *More Songs about Buildings and Food*. Cortez invited the Englishman to Mass's duplex apartment on 8th Street to persuade him to record a soundtrack for his Elvis film. Just under two weeks later, Eno attended a five-night music series at the TriBeCa gallery and performance venue Artists Space that featured ten bands, among them the Contortions, Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, Mars, and DNA. With Cortez, Phillips, and Arto Lindsay of DNA facilitating a process that began with further meetings on 8th Street, Eno recorded a showcase *No New York* compilation album that captured their post–new wave sound, soon to be known as no wave.[4] Lodging on the spare floor in Mass's duplex, Eno ended up extending his visit from three weeks to seven months. "It turned out that I happened to be in New York during one of the most exciting months of the decade, I should think, in terms of music," Eno recalled in 1980. "It seemed like there were 500 new bands who all started that month."[5]

Back on White Street, Cortez and Phillips persuaded Mass to name his venue the Molotov Cocktail Lounge after the MCL letters inscribed on the building's frontage, only for the entrepreneur to backtrack on the basis that the name was too inflammatory. After all, whereas Cortez and Phillips were free to take chances, he had a medical business service to protect, plus he wanted the liquor license application process to be smooth. As an alternative he proposed the Mudd Club Lounge, which both referenced Samuel Alexander Mudd (the southerner physician who treated John Wilkes Booth for the injury he suffered after he assassinated President Lincoln) and somewhat obliquely evoked his anthropological interest in indigenous peoples. The suggestion riled Cortez and Phillips, however, and a subsequent meeting between Mass and Phillips culminated in a blow-out argument. Unable to remember the details of the altercation, Mass wonders if Phillips took umbrage to the news that he was applying for a liquor license in his own name, yet

Cortez maintains that Mass's sole ownership was never in doubt. "We were never financial partners with Steve and we didn't want to be part of any administrative machine," he points out. "It was just our idea." Chance confirms that Phillips couldn't have cared less about the liquor application. "In Anya's mind she was going to be the manager of the club and the guiding spirit behind the whole thing, and Steve would stay in the background," he recalls. "But she absolutely hated the Mudd Club name and all of a sudden she was completely out."

Mass proceeded with the renovation of the White Street space as if nothing had happened. He organized the main room around a long bar embedded with his personal collection of aviation maps and equipped with two turntables. At the far end of the room he installed a small, collapsible modular stage that could be easily erected and dismantled so the room could support live music followed by dancing. For the sound system he teamed up with Eno to re-create the studio conditions he had experienced during the recording sessions of *No New York* so his future crowd could listen to punk's Rimbaud-style symbolist lyrics with absolute clarity. Outside he left the building's nondescript frontage untouched in order to contribute to the impression the club existed several urban layers deep. He also employed a local blacksmith to create an industrial chain and stanchion that would offer a symbolic challenge to the velvet rope deployed by Manhattan's elitist midtown discotheques. "The velvet rope was designed to keep the people lacking taste, the underclass, away," notes Mass. "But I took the velvet rope and devalued it."

With typesetter Alex Blair facilitating — she knew Eno and through Eno knew Mass — *Punk* magazine staged the first event at the Mudd Club, an awards ceremony afterparty that happened to fall the day after Sid Vicious was arrested for killing his girlfriend, Nancy Spungen (on Friday, 13 October). "There were all these people there, all these movers and shakers — Amos Poe, Anya Phillips, rock and roll people like David Johansen [of the New York Dolls]," recalls novice DJ David Azarch, a sales assistant in a record store called Jimmy's Music World. "I was, 'Wow, wow, wow, wow!' " Having maintained standoffish contact with Mass because she had started to manage the Contortions as well as date Chance, and hoping to be able to arrange for the Contortions to perform at the new venue, Phillips staged a party that featured Chance lip-synching to James Brown records a week or so later. Mass then held an unofficial launch on Halloween, during which local punk band Xerox took to the stage wearing blacklight outfits and the Georgian new wavers the B-52's performed in girdles. "It was just an amazing night," recalls Azarch, who showed up to DJ without even knowing the B-52's were going to play. "The downtown

arts scene mixed with the rock and roll scene from a little bit north. It was just a magical mix. The place was electric."

Hosted by Tina L'Hotsky, a Cleveland Institute of Art graduate, underground film director/actor, and organizer of several impromptu parties in rubble-strewn lots on Avenue C, the "Cha-Cha Party" of 5 December hinted at the creative bedlam that was about to unfold in the Mudd Club. Breaking with the East Village punk scene's benign disinterest in the local migrant community, the night celebrated Caribbean, Latin, and East Village storefront culture as revelers dressed "Rican," the room was hung with bananas and southern religious icons, waiters served Spanish sherry and pork rinds, a local Hispanic television celebrity sang ethnic songs, and L'Hotsky celebrated the publication of her photo-fiction book, *Muchachas Espanola Loca* (*Crazy Spanish Girls*).[6] The night amounted to a rare flash of exuberance as Steve Mass waited for his temporary license to be made permanent. Then, once the owner was satisfied the certification was in order, he took the Mudd Club on a run of activity that knew no obvious nightlife precedent in terms of curatorial range and visceral fire.

Held approximately once a month, immersive parties drew inspiration from the Fluxus happenings of the 1960s that saw avant-garde artists and musicians integrate a range of media and disciplines to challenge received assumptions about art and commerce. Staged at the beginning of 1979, the "Hawaiian Beach Party" featured hula dancers, Polynesian music and decor, tropical drinks, and another set from the B-52's. Taking its name from the abuse-and-survival memoir published by one of Joan Crawford's adoptees, the "Joan Crawford 'Mommie's Dearest' Mother's Day Celebration" featured a complete 1950s kitchen installation plus a large party cake furnished with a gagged and bound baby doll tied to a Styrofoam bed post, around which Joan Crawford lookalikes mixed and mingled with partygoers who dressed up as battered and abused children.[7] Commemorating D-Day, the "War Games: Combat Love Party" included a live set from Shrapnel, refreshments in the form of World War II–style K-rations, and a Jane Fonda protest doll for target practice, with participants dressing as members of the Women's Army Corps, Stormtroopers, generals, protestors, geishas, Nazi dykes, USO (United States Organization) chorus girls, and related figures (as the flyer instructed).[8] Then there was the "Rock 'n' Roll Funeral Ball Extravaganza," which staged a mock funeral procession of dead rock stars Mama Cass, Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison, Elvis Presley, and Sid Vicious, who were laid to rest in coffins in tableau-style

"Rock 'n' Roll Funeral Ball Extravaganza" at the Mudd Club. Photograph by and courtesy of Allan Tannenbaum/SoHo Blues ©.

recreations of their death scenes, from the syringe that pierced Joplin's arm to the plate of ham sandwiches on which Cass reputedly choked to death. "The parties took American institutions and parodied and destroyed them in one way or another," comments Mass. "All kinds of unexpected things would happen."

Mass simultaneously curated a live music program that saw the B-52's, Marianne Faithfull, and Talking Heads take to the same, modular stage as new wave and no wave outfits Boris Policeband, DNA, the Feelies, the Fleshtones, Material, the Necessaries, Suicide, and Tuxedomoon. The owner also booked the composer-performer-guitarists Rhys Chatham and Glenn Branca, who created minimalist drone sounds played at ear-splitting volume. Yet while many of these lineups bolstered a dissonant aesthetic reminiscent of the one already shaped at CBGB and Max's, Mass made a point of embracing a radical eclecticism that saw him schedule the experimental composer-musicians Laurie Anderson, Harold Budd, Peter Gordon, and David van Tieghem; heavy metal terrorizers Judas Priest; ska and reggae lineups such as the U.K. breakthrough band Madness; macabre R&B performer Screamin' Jay Hawkins; New Orleans vocalist and pianist Professor Longhair; pioneering girl groups the Crystals and the Shirelles; and the "Queen of Motown," Mary Wells. "I thought that there were similarities between all these different types of music," explains the

owner. "I didn't care what the audience thought. I wasn't trying to supply the audience with a punk repertoire. To me stylistic coherence didn't matter at all." He also saw black music as part of an "extraordinary revolutionary phenomenon" that was as politically and conceptually radical as the white rock and punk music that was more readily lauded in downtown circles. "The punks," he thought, "were privileged to even rub elbows" with black musicians.

With screenings scheduled between 7:00 and 9:00 PM, the innovative visual culture was more aesthetically and socially coherent. Downtown video artist teams Emily Armstrong/Pat Ivers and Kit Fitzgerald/John Sanborn were among the first to show their work using the venue's huge, bullet-shaped, black-and-white projector. *Interview Magazine* editor Glenn O'Brien and Blondie guitarist Chris Stein filmed several episodes of their punk-oriented cable access program *TV Party* in the venue. No wave directors Kathryn Bigelow, Jim Jarmusch, Eric Mitchell, James Nares, and Amos Poe contributed to screenings that took place once every two weeks or so. "Clubs didn't have film before the Mudd Club," points out Mass, who played the part of the entrepreneur abducted and abused by blunted bohemians in Mitchell's 1978 film *Kidnapped*. "But all of these people were my friends. That was my initial entry into the club scene — through film."

Alternative fashion also figured prominently as Mass commissioned a "whole army" of young punk-inspired designers to put on shows. "I was always trying to involve them in the life of the Mudd Club," comments the owner. "That was part of the sociology of the scene that really interested me because they were deconstructing the commodity. They were living examples of the Situationist strategy." Betsey Johnson, Maripol, Stephen Sprouse, Anna Sui, and Tish and Snooky helped shape a style that combined the dressy and the homemade. "There was this really big and strong DIY ethos everywhere, and that also became what was in fashion," explains Chi Chi Valenti, a window display designer, who for "Combat Love" dressed in the Nazi regalia worn by the former concentration camp prisoner when she begins a relationship with her ex-guard in the film *The Night Porter*. "We didn't want our outfits to look too studied. The look was not just punk but low rent, xeroxy. It was really about creating something from nothing."

Meanwhile the spiky-haired, Beatle-booted Azarch continued to select records for $5/hour, with Sean Cassette, Mark Fodiatis, and Danny Heaps working as alternates. "My attitude from the very first time I did it was to play music that I liked," notes Azarch, who was eighteen years old at the time. "People were just into the music. They didn't say, 'Let's go dance.' It was, 'Check this song out' and the next thing you know people were on the dance floor. It just

escalated from there. There weren't very specific markings as to how it happened." Warming up with tracks by the likes of Eno and Kraftwerk before he turned to Blondie, David Bowie, the Clash, Cold Hero (later the Cure), Elvis Costello, ELO, the Only Ones, Tom Petty, Iggy Pop, Lou Reed, the Sex Pistols, and Talking Heads, Azarch felt his way into the novice role of the punk rock DJ. "David Bowie came to the club one night and Steve Mass came to me and said, 'David Bowie's here,'" he recalls. "I said to myself, 'The last thing David Bowie wants to hear is David Bowie,' so I played everything he'd played sax on or produced. I was like, I have *Transformer* [by Lou Reed], I have Iggy Pop — things he was involved with over time. It was just my response."

Mass nevertheless believed that the DJ-ing profession had yet to throw up the kind of artist figure he would have liked to employ, so he "tried to make up for it" by instructing Azarch to make a specific selection whenever it took his fancy. "I would actually impose my eclectic taste, throwing in all kinds of strange stuff," comments the owner. "As the dance floor was erupting in a magical, orgiastic moment, I might switch into a soundtrack of roaring tornadoes hitting a small town in Texas. I actually had one woman come up to me, crying, and say, 'How could you do something so awful?' Like I was a war criminal." Azarch recalls Mass would approach him during the middle of the night with a 45 of "Betty Lou Got a New Pair of Shoes," an obscure song from the 1950s, and order him to play it five or six times in a row. "He'd stand in the booth sipping his drink, loving that I was playing this record," remembers the DJ. "People would be standing, looking at me, saying, 'What are you doing?'"

The Mudd Club became the preferred hangout for a group of miscellaneous bohemians, many of them one-time Max's and CBGB regulars who found themselves drawn to the White Street spot's wider range of creative engagements. In addition to the musicians, film directors, and fashion designers who socialized as well as worked at the spot, regulars included Andy Warhol and Warhol Superstars Jackie Curtis and Nico, beat writers William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg, poet John Giorno, post-Marxist intellectual Sylvère Lotringer, *East Village Eye* editor Leonard Abrams, graffiti artist Jean-Michel Basquiat, art critic Edit deAk, and the poet-actor-painter Rene Ricard. Numerous others hung out at the spot, even if they didn't perform there during its opening months, among them Debbie Harry and Chris Stein of Blondie, Arto Lindsay, John Lurie of the Lounge Lizards, German countertenor Klaus Nomi, the band members of the Ramones, and Johnny Thunders of the New York Dolls. Experimental writer Kathy Acker and underground cinema star Patti Astor joined L'Hotsky, Lunch, and Valenti to form an active contingent of third-wave feminists. Critic Bernard Gendron argues the

Klaus Nomi at the Mudd Club. Photograph by and courtesy of Nicholas Taylor ©.

venue resembled a modern-day reincarnation of either Le Chat Noir, the late nineteenth-century cabaret that served the bohemian Montmartre district of Paris, or Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, Hugo Ball's mutinous cabaret that inspired the Dada movement.[9] "The Mudd Club wasn't a destination; it was a place for locals to hang out," observes Azarch. "The people who were coming to hang out were people of some notoriety or people who later on became people of notoriety. I would turn around and there'd be Jean-Michel Basquiat or Allen Ginsberg. Here I was, not only in their presence but entertaining them."

A new type of hangout had come into being — one that made CBGB's exclusive focus on live music appear anachronistic. "The Mudd Club wasn't just a new club," comments Johnny Dynell, who traveled to New York to go to art college, joined a no wave band, and lived in Bleckner's painting studio. "It was a new concept." Having kickstarted her film career at CBGB after meeting Poe there, Astor began to head to White Street on a nightly basis as soon as it opened. "That's where you met everybody," she comments. "It became the only place to go." Because of the scarcity of phones never mind answering machines, many gravitated to Mass's spot not only to socialize but also to find out what was going down: who was making what film or planning what special party or putting together what fashion show or staging what theater production. In short, it operated as both a scene unto itself and also a scene generator, or a place where it was possible to make connections and begin

collaborations. "There were so many people who got their start at the Mudd Club," adds Dynell. "When the Mudd Club opened, it wasn't just a new club. It was a new generation."

Troubled when he learned that a key figure from the art scene had been refused entry one night, Mass employed local artist and Max's/CBGB habitué Richard Boch to run the door four months after opening. Sometimes following and sometimes ignoring the owner's "off-the-wall" guidelines, Boch drew on gut instinct as well as scenester knowledge as he welcomed artists, the rock and roll crowd, the fashion set, and celebrities such as David Bowie, Mick Jagger, Iggy Pop, and Lou Reed while refusing entry to tourists as well as anyone who "seemed like a jerk" or "came on strong" (unless they enjoyed a connection to Mass or the venue). "The Mudd Club was often on the edge of being out of control," observes Boch. "It was its ability to not tip over the edge that made it what it was. When the door was handled well it rarely toppled over." Mass came to view Boch as a linchpin who knew to admit Robert Rauschenberg if he showed up "in a drunken state, disheveled, holding onto some sixteen-year-old boy," yet would also make record company executives, tastemakers, and anyone who rolled up in a limousine wait "while some sixteen-year-old punkette got in ahead of them." *SoHo News* ad salesperson and *Living Eye* fanzine editor Ken Aronds benefited the night he showed up with Susan, a two-and-a-half-foot, hunchbacked punk who walked with a cane. "The doorkeepers gawked at us and let us in," he recalls. "We were a freak show, something different, and that's why we were admitted."

As the pressure on the door mounted, especially over weekends, Mass extended the club into the second floor, shaping it as a breakout lounge space, which he could open when the first floor became packed, as well as a room where he could position the installations he commissioned for the happenings. Equipped with ugly banquettes purchased in an auction plus a Zodiac Wurlitzer jukebox that he stocked with records that ranged from the Sex Pistols to Pat Boone, the lounge soon doubled as a retreat for regulars who wanted to congregate away from the hurly-burly of the first floor, and it acquired VIP status when Valenti became its doorkeeper during weekends. A foreboding presence who boasted an exquisite line in dominance outfits, Valenti received $75 for her 2:30 AM to 6:30 AM shifts, and although Mass maintains that he never intended the second floor to become an exclusive domain, with the basement his preferred hideaway for celebrities such as Bowie, that's how his crowd imagined it. "Steve started to go up the floors," recalls Astor. "He kept that VIP room pretty tight. The original people were always taken care of. I didn't pay for a drink for four years."

It was the second-floor lounge space and in particular the Wurlitzer's juxtaposition of punk and easy listening pop that caught the attention of Anita Sarko when she visited the Mudd Club for the first time soon after the second-floor lounge opened in the spring. A radio DJ based in Atlanta, she heard about the spot from local band the B-52's and arrived with high expectations, only to experience a twang of disappointment at what she judged to be the conservative rock selections of whoever was DJ-ing that night. Raised on an eclectic diet of musical theater, gospel, Elvis, Motown, English rock, and Michigan punk, Sarko concluded that she "could do better," returned home to gather her possessions, headed back to New York, and met Mass when she gatecrashed an uptown party for the Who. The owner offered her Mondays and Tuesdays, having started to DJ himself in order to fill a vacancy that appears to have emerged when Cassette left to play at a struggling midtown rock discotheque called Hurrah. Azarch held onto the busiest nights of the week while Sarko took to selecting music for the start-of-the-week diehards.

Dressing in outfits that combined glam, vintage, and punk, Sarko confronted expectations by integrating funk, jazz, R&B, soul, folk, reggae, and "lots of foreign" alongside more obvious punk, new wave, and no wave cuts. "My style was to mix all sorts of music together so nobody ever knew what was going to happen next," she explains. "I always had hundreds of records surrounding me because I could only think in a free-form, improvisational way. I never knew what the energy would be that night or what I would be in the mood for or how the guests would feel." Unable to grasp the concept of thinking outside the box because she had never been able to locate the "fucking box" in the first place, the DJ also introduced noise, classical, and spoken-word cuts, toying with variables to discover "what reactions could occur through the abstraction of sound." For the "Rock 'n' Roll Funeral Ball Extravaganza," when revelers were required to dress as someone who was dead or should be dead, she played records within the same parameters. "Obviously Paul McCartney was included because of the rumor that he had died and been replaced by a lookalike," she remembers. "That had always been the explanation for Wings [McCartney's post-Beatles lineup]."

If Mass wondered at how he had come to run the hottest off-the-radar spot in the city as a result of discussions with Cortez and Phillips plus a $15,000 budget, the radar began to track his venue when *People Magazine* became the first national outlet to cover the spot in July 1979. "Ever on the prowl for outrageous novelty, New York's fly-by-night crowd of punks, posers and the ultra hip has discovered new turf on which to flaunt its manic chic," reported the publication. "For sheer kinkiness, there has been nothing like it since the

cabaret scene in 1920s Berlin." The tabloid gorged on the unfolding scene, noting that it amounted to a "depraved version" of *Let's Make a Deal* and feigning shock that "one man gained entrance simply by flashing the stump of his amputated arm." The Mudd Club, it added, had made the midtown discotheque and celebrity magnet Studio 54 seem almost passé in six months flat as it assembled its crowd "like some sort of perverse trash compactor."[10] If anything, Mass set out with the thought that the Mudd Club would operate as the polar opposite of Studio, with its industrial chain and unlit entrance symbolic of its opposition to midtown disco's rootedness in hierarchy, flashiness, and materialism. But as the *People* article fomented demand, the owner began to feel that "something got out of control" and even began to fear that the "whole thing couldn't go on." Then again, disco was about to implode, and not even the punk crowd had got around to calculating the consequences of that.

A strong anti-disco feeling ran through the Mudd Club. "The music became monotonous and there was this celebration of people not getting in, of social exclusivity, so I knew I wanted the Mudd Club to be the opposite of the glitz of the disco ball," Steve Mass explains. "I think it was a mistake, but we had no appreciation of disco whatsoever. This went across the board, from Diego to the lowest thug working for Warner Bros." Mass judged Studio 54 to be symptomatic of the society of the spectacle while Cortez confirms that he and Phillips imagined the Mudd Club as being "anti-disco from the beginning" because "we wanted a place to dance but not to the innocuous auto-beats of the large NYC disco." Azarch notes that he "was not a big fan" of disco, especially the "standardized" tracks that were being "pumped out." Arguing that disco sounded like "musical wallpaper" and that disco-style beat mixing "didn't allow one to change direction or enmesh different sounds and moods," Sarko maintains that her approach to DJ-ing amounted to "the antithesis of disco."

Punk opposition to disco came to the fore during 1976 when *Punk* magazine editor John Holmstrom rallied against its rootedness in the studio and repetition.[11] Feelings of hostility peppered with disgust intensified when Studio 54 opened the following spring and the Brooklyn disco movie *Saturday Night Fever* began its record-breaking run in November, leading disco to become associated with velvet-rope elitism on the one hand and working-class suburbia on the other. The Mudd Club opened toward the end of 1978, just before Warner Bros. became the first major label to open a disco department and just before analysts confirmed that the year saw the dance genre surpass

rock in terms of sales. When author Vita Miezitis toured New York's night clubs during the summer of 1979 to research a book published in 1980, she was struck by the Mudd Club's "anti-disco dress code" as well as the way the DJ that night would select "every kind of music but disco."[12]

Yet although the White Street venue appeared to exist as the perfect counterpoint to disco, its crowd soon came to contain too many disco habitués for it to mount a credible stand against the culture. With Warhol leading the way and the high-profile federal raid on Studio 54 in December 1978 encouraging others to follow, midtown regulars started to gravitate to White Street soon after it opened, reassured that the door queues and atmosphere of exclusivity offered important continuities. When Victor Hugo performed at the spot in July 1979, a photographer caught Studio 54 co-owner Steve Rubell slouching on a sofa beside his lawyer Roy Cohn. "My evenings were pretty much equally divided between the Mudd Club and Studio 54," adds Monica Lynch, a one-time regular at La Mere Vipere who worked on 54th Street. "Steve Rubell always hired fun young kids to decorate the room at Studio 54 and the younger kids like myself would also venture downtown. Stirling St. Jacques might not have been going to the Mudd Club but there was more overlap than people thought. They were both discos, frankly." Peaking when Chicago talk DJ Steve Dahl blew up forty thousand disco records during an anti-disco rally, also in July 1979, the frequently homophobic, racist, and sexist backlash against disco rendered punk's opposition anachronistic. "We all had to face the reality that we were, with our disco hatred, aligning ourselves with the forces of reaction," remembers Aronds. "At that point I began to examine my prejudices and I didn't like what I found."

It was in this setting that Johnny Dynell executed what he perceived to be the ultimate punk move by selecting disco, having started to DJ around the time of the "Rock 'n' Roll Funeral Ball Extravaganza." "I was hanging out," he recounted later. "I needed money. I needed a job and Steve just said, out of the corner of his mouth, 'Well, uh, what do you want to do? Do you want to be a bartender? What exactly do you want to do?' So, out of the blue, I just said, 'I want to be a deejay.' "[13] Cast in the role of Elvis for the funeral ball, Dynell started to appear between Azarch's and Sarko's sets. "I was doing disco as a kind of art," he explains. "I was dressing in tight Jordache jeans — they were the look of uptown disco, of Studio 54 — and I had my hair cut like John Travolta." He even penned a spoof *National Enquirer*–style article titled "How I Beat Cancer by Listening to Disco Music" in the *SoHo News* under the name of Pablo "Cuchi-Frito" Cordova that featured a mock interview with Johnny Savas (his original family name). "I can assure you I haven't the slightest de-

sire to return to my old body-destroying slow-death listening diet," declared Savas. "It's marvelous how your sensibilities become more sensitive to the many varieties of artists playing disco music today."[14]

Dynell didn't share any contempt his Mudd Club peers might have felt toward disco, including those who approached him during the night to ask "What is this nigger-shit?" or to declare "Go back to Studio 54 where you belong."[15] It wasn't just that his ears heard the "Uh-huh, uh-huh" chorus of KC & the Sunshine Band's "That's the Way (I Like It)" to be a kind of punk chant. He also might have been the only White Street regular to frequent the downtown dance scene, which took root prior to the rise of disco as well as punk when David Mancuso started to hold private parties in February 1970 and the Sanctuary re-opened as the first public discotheque to welcome gay men around the same time. "I went to the Loft, I went to the Paradise Garage, I went to hear Danny Krivit at One's, I went to the first Limelight, I went to Buttermilk Bottom, so I was much more comfortable with disco than the other Mudd Club DJs," he notes. "Disco became this thing and a lot of people wanted to distance themselves from it, but I never thought of the Loft and the Paradise Garage and One's as discos in the first place." Yet with Dahl and the federal raid of Studio instilling the backlash with a reactionary complexion, the Mudd Club crowd's response to Dynell turned out to be remarkably enthusiastic. "I was like, 'If people wanted to dance to disco music, why didn't they go uptown for that?'" remembers Azarch. "But so many people wanted to hear it I was like, 'Wow, this is interesting.'" Recognizing that some of Dynell's selections were "really good," he tweaked his style accordingly. "I'd play 'Mr. Big Stuff' [by Jean Knight] first and then 'Hot Stuff' by the Stones and then 'Hot Stuff' by Donna Summer, so I'd create these themes."

The Mudd Club had come a long way from Max's (where Dynell had been thrown out for dancing) and CBGB (where James Chance "really hated" the lack of a dance floor).[16] It was true that nobody was "commanded" to dance in the White Street spot, as Valenti puts it, but while Sarko could get away with her idiosyncratic selections on the comparatively quiet nights of Mondays and Tuesdays, the rest of the week became notable for its kinetic crescendos. As much as Cortez enjoyed talking, he "danced all the time as well," he recalls, while Lynch remembers "ferocious dancing" at the spot. "We were making fun of Studio 54 and Les Mouches, but people started dancing and the Mudd Club changed into this major dance club," argues Dynell. "It was a joke and nobody expected the whole thing to blow up." The venue was helping establish the foundations for a renaissance marked by convergence and exploration. "Very quickly the Mudd Club had a sound that was edgy and

The Mudd Club dance floor, 1979. Photograph by and courtesy of Allan Tannenbaum/ SoHo Blues ©.

alternative — Ian Dury, 'Reasons to Be Cheerful'; Flying Lizards, 'Money'; the Slits, 'Heard It through the Grapevine'; Marianne Faithfull, 'Why D'Ya Do It?,'" adds Dynell. "But these records had a beat and the basic beat was disco."

The Hegelian struggles of the 1970s were approaching the point of implosion. Punk and disco had respectively challenged the stagnant status quo, only to swerve into a dialectical battle of their own. But instead of concluding with a winner, the bout ended in a draw as the contestants clasped one another, exhausted, and in that moment grasped that victory could lie in amalgamation rather than annihilation. "If the thing you're fighting is no longer there then you're fighting windmills," points out Sarko. "But in this case Mudd Club did have an identity of its own. It was art-based, postmodern and postpunk, and it was also about expression and humor and creativity, not fame or wealth or the desire to be recognized by those who were part of the agreed-upon establishment. It was about pushing boundaries and continually being open to new

ideas and forms, which was why we all dabbled in each other's art, whether that be acting, painting, DJ-ing or putting on shows." The more philosophical, adds Sarko, were more interested in "the process than the outcome."

An unpredictable, mutant, and at times indelibly strange period in the history of New York party culture was about to unfold, and at its vanguard stood a fledgling nightlife operator who placed experimentation and contradiction at the heart of his operation. "I wasn't for or against either side," reasons Mass. "I felt the only way to run a club was to be constantly turning things upside down. As far as I was concerned, this is the kind of atmosphere creativity thrives in. This was my aesthetic theory." The downtown party scene was heading in a direction that was unpredictable, darkly humorous, inventive, and participatory.

2

THE BASEMENT DEN AT CLUB 57

A self-described suburban refugee of West Virginia, Ann Magnuson studied theater and cinema in Ohio before moving to New York in January 1978 to complete her studies by working as an intern director. She arrived somewhat disappointed that the Great Lakes College Association had assigned her to work at the Ensemble Studio Theater, an Off-Broadway theater company based on 52nd Street, rather than an avant-garde, downtown setup. But within days she threw herself into the sunless substrata of CBGB and Max's Kansas City, where she headed "every night" except the one when she checked out Studio 54, which held her attention for all of fifteen minutes. "The punk bands at CBGB opened everybody's eyes and made us think, 'Yeah, pick up an instrument, pick up a paintbrush, there's nothing to stop you!' " she reminisces. " 'There are no limits, there are no rules! Let your freak flag wave high!' " Fair-skinned, doe-eyed, and inspired, Magnuson resolved to combine her two worlds of theater and nightclubs. By June she was so immersed she refused to attend her graduation ceremony.

That autumn Magnuson teamed up with CBGB friends Susan Hannaford and Tom Scully to stage a four-night "New Wave Vaudeville" variety show at Irving Plaza, a Polish veterans' club located at 15th Street and Irving Place. With punk-art energy charging the rehearsals, which included debutant Klaus Nomi singing an aria from the opera *Samson et Dalila* dressed in alien drag, building manager Stanley Strychacki invited the audacious organizers to view another spot he ran, Club 57, previously the East Village Student Club, which was located in the basement of the Holy Cross Polish National Church at 57 St. Mark's Place. Strychacki had already started to schedule punk concerts and film screenings in the spot, including the April 1978 Reelin', Rockin' Film Festival.[1] But there were limits to what he could manage, plus neighbors complained about the live music, so he decided to head in the direction of the

"New Wave Vaudeville" cabaret. The Mudd Club had only just got going and was barely open to the public. There was plenty of slack to take up.

Hannaford, Magnuson, and Scully checked out the St. Mark's Place spot and then returned with friends to test opinion. "We entered into this small dark room with low ceilings and random institutional pieces of furniture scattered around," recalls School of Visual Arts (SVA) student Frank Holliday. "There was an old wooden bar on the left side, much like other Polish bars in the neighborhood, but smaller, and there was some old lamp. It smelled like a church — it was musty, old, dark." Holliday remembers that "it really didn't look like much," but Scully could barely contain his excitement as he explained how the spot could be used to stage parties and screenings, and Strychacki couldn't have been happier when the three friends agreed to accept his offer. "I fell in love with them and I got them!" recalls the Polish manager.[2]

Strychacki continued to schedule events during the long, hard winter of 1978–1979, among them Double Exposure, a four-night film and performance festival that featured subterranean stars such as Kathy Acker, John Lurie, and James Nares. Then, beginning in April, Hannaford, Magnuson, and Scully cleaned and painted the basement spot while Strychacki persuaded Magnuson to take on a managerial role. A month later, Hannaford and Scully launched the weekly Monster Movie Club with a screening of the sci-fi comedy *Invasion of the Saucer Men*, and the night soon started to attract SVA students, who took to punctuating films with riotous comments as joints and mushrooms accentuated the fun. The venue quickly settled into a quiet routine that featured movie nights, theatrical performances, St. Mark's Poetry Project events, and, beginning in August, meetings of the Ladies Auxiliary of the Lower East Side, a Magnuson-led feminist group that resembled a punk version of the Junior League. "There was this guy at one of the St. Mark's Poetry Project nights doing this off-the-wall stuff and they all hated him," recalls Magnuson, who was managing the venue that night. "When he came up to the bar I said, 'You're my favorite poet!' That was the first time I met Keith and we became friends."

Raised in Kutztown, Pennsylvania, Keith Haring was already combining calligraphy, energetic shapes, semiotics, and the cutup language of William Burroughs and Fluxus with a passion for performance, music, and partying when SVA and pot-smoking buddy Holliday introduced him to Club 57. Soon after, Haring started to usher other college friends into the denlike spot. One of them, Kenny Scharf, a University of California graduate, melded pop art, surrealism, suburban culture, and space-age imagery. Another, John McLaughlin, shifted

Club 57 entrance. Photograph by and courtesy of Harvey Wang ©.

his focus from painting to performance art as he restyled his hair into a blond pompadour, took on the persona of a Las Vegas lounge singer/alternative burlesque performer, and started to go under the name of John Sex. A third, Drew Straub, who also hailed from Kutztown, started to make art out of pennies. A fourth, Wendy Wild, who was dating Sex, flung herself into performance opportunities and took on the celebrated role of preparing the mushroom punch. "Club 57 attracted a particular kind of art student, as well as people who never went to art school but were attracted to that kind of aesthetic," remembers Magnuson, who signed all comers up to a $2-a-head membership system, introduced in case the cops asked why alcohol was being served in the unlicensed club. "Everybody started to meet each other and it just built."

Following a stifling August, Magnuson began to curate and organize nights at a bewildering pace, with Hannaford and Scully, the SVA posse, and regulars such as Dany Johnson, William Fleet Lively, Andy Rees, Naomi Regelson, and the Ladies Auxiliary troops contributing to a program that started to run six nights a week during the autumn. Screenings remained at the core of the program. Jerry Beck's "Cartoons You Won't See on TV" presented animation that featured violence, sex, and racism. "Home Movie Torture" show-

cased embarrassing moments captured on video. Beck and Magnuson's retro TV night "Television Nostomania" replayed episodes of TV shows from the 1950s and 1960s. Bill Landis, the creator of grindhouse-movie scene journal *Sleazoid Express*, presented films that captured the sex and drugs culture of Times Square. Film also merged with performance and partying, as was the case the night Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* played during the "Decadent High Fashion Bacchanal Party." Meanwhile Hannaford and Scully augmented their Monster Movie Club by initiating a second weekly slot that screened films ranging from *Belle de Jour*, Luis Buñuel's tale of a housewife's sadomasochistic fantasy, to Russ Meyer's exploitation film *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* The curatorial efforts of her partners shaped the emergence of a "Hammer-vampire-Texas-Chainsaw-astrozombie knowledge," Magnuson argued in 1982.[3]

Club 57 also introduced a vibrant combination of artistic and performance-based events that knew no obvious precedent in the city, in part because noise problems prevented Magnuson and company from developing the kind of live music schedule that Steve Mass had championed at the Mudd Club. Scharf staged the venue's first exhibition, *Celebration of the Space Age*. Haring curated a multi-artist *Xerox Art* show and an open *Club 57 Invitational*. Sex's participatory "Acts of Live Art" nights integrated all manner of weird and wild performances, including wheelchair-bound convulsions, the Bertha Butt Boogie caveman dance, naked rapping, majorette tap dancing to disco, and a matador striptease. Participatory events such as the punk rock game show "Name That Noise," the photo dance party "Pictures You Can Dance To," and the performance night "Rapper Party, Psycho Disco with Special Guests" kept the fun and inventiveness flowing. If there was live music, it usually came courtesy of in-house bands, the Man Rays, who performed with tin foil wrapped around their heads so that they resembled human baked potatoes (as Kai Eric, a front man, conceptual artist, and boyfriend of Magnuson, liked to put it), or from featured bands, that didn't push the decibels too hard, as was the case with ART, the Only Band in the World.

Special parties completed the schedule. The Ladies Auxiliary started things off with a packed "Stay Free Mini Prom." Magnuson channeled her obsession with the communist bloc at "Radio Free Europe," where she launched her Russian pop-star character Anoushka. Revelers messed about with model kits, glue, and (for those who wanted to sniff the glue) paper bags at "Dada Disco GoGo Cavalcade/Model World of Glue," after which the Man Rays performed "Dada Disco." The "Putt-Putt Reggae Party" featured a miniature eighteen-hole-golf-course-cum-Jamaican-shantytown made out of refrigerator boxes. "Iran, Iraq and Iroll" satirized the stalled Iran hostage crisis as Scully

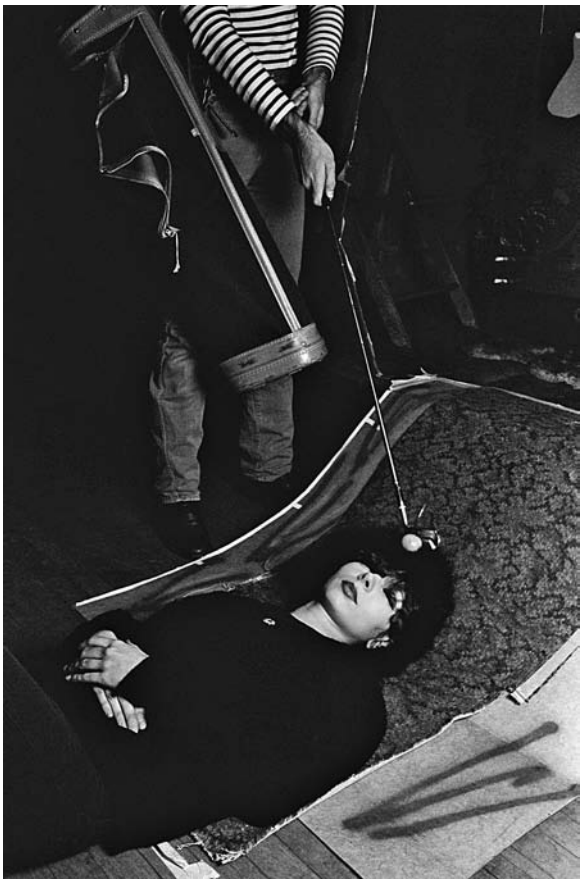
DJ-ed in a headdress made out of a U.S. flag. "Ladies Wrestling Night" featured raucous battles, faux coaches, and camp refereeing. The "Bongo Voodoo" event combined chicken cursing, secret rituals, and frenzied ceremonial dancing. And the "Debutante Ball" foregrounded elegant outfits, couples dancing, and MC Kristian Hoffman of punk outfit the Mumps crooning ballads. And so the theme parties rolled until the calendar crescendoed with the "Elvis Memorial Party," held in mid-August 1980, which brought together Elvis lookalikes, impressionists, memorabilia, and a screening of *King Creole*, only for a faulty air conditioner to burst into flames and break up the festivities. Revelers proceeded to clamber onto the fire truck until angry Polish residents doused them with bathwater.[4]

Dancing became central to the fun as Club 57-ites honed retro styles such as the twist, the shimmy, the frug, and the jerk, usually in bursts of an hour or two before and after the billed attraction. Initially Scully supplied the music via a jukebox, but then the cofounder started to DJ, sometimes putting on themed nights such as "British Invasion" and "The Wild, Wild World of Speed," with Naomi Regelson and Dany Johnson also taking turns. Notable for her mix of boogaloo, go-go, funk, and new wave, and favoring what she calls "campy records" sourced in neighborhood junk shops, Johnson became the main DJ over time. "Dany always knew how to make us shake hard and fast," recalls Scharf. "The spoof atmosphere was part of the fun." Packed with just fifty people and rammed when one hundred showed up, the floor heated up quickly. "There'd be so much dancing the DJ equipment would start to vibrate and the music would skip," remembers Magnuson, who also played records from time to time. "That was a huge problem. It'd put a dampener on proceedings and sometimes we'd just resort to the jukebox." Eric, another occasional DJ, described Club 57 as an envirothèque — or an environmental discotheque.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

DANY JOHNSON, CLUB 57 (1980)

Ray Barretto, "Midnight Boogaloo"
The B-52's, "Dance This Mess Around"
The B-52's, "Planet Claire"
Blondie, "I Know but I Don't Know"
Bootsy's Rubber Band, "Bootzilla"
James Brown, "The Payback"



Susan Hannaford at the "Putt-Putt Reggae Party."
Photograph by and courtesy of Harvey Wang ©.

The Bush Tetras, "Too Many Creeps"
Bobby Byrd, "Hot Pants — I'm Coming, I'm Coming, I'm Coming"
Edd Byrnes, "Kookie's Mad Pad"
Cannibal & the Headhunters, "Land of 1,000 Dances"
Jimmy Castor, "The Bertha Butt Boogie"
Chakachas, "Jungle Fever"
Petula Clark, "I Know a Place"
Lynn Collins, "Rock Me Again & Again & Again & Again & Again & Again (6 Times)"
Count 5, "Psychotic Reaction"
The Cramps, "I'm Cramped"

Ann Magnuson on the floor during the "Ladies Wrestling Night." Photograph by and courtesy of Harvey Wang ©.

Delta 5, "Mind Your Own Business"
Manu Dibango, "Soul Makossa"
Duane Eddy, "Peter Gunn"
Shirley Ellis, "The Clapping Song (Clap Pat Clap Slap)"
Fatback Band, "King Tim III (Personality Jock)"
Fela and Afrika 70, "Zombie!"
Aretha Franklin, "Rock Steady"
Incredible Bongo Band, "Bongo Rock"
The Joe Cuba Sextet, "Bang! Bang!"
King Swallow, "Please Don't Stop the Party Party Party"
Little Richard, "The Girl Can't Help It"
Lene Lovich, "Lucky Number"
Lulu, "The Boat That I Row"
Marie et les Garçons, "Re-Bop"

Mitch Ryder and the Detroit Wheels, "Devil with a Blue Dress On"
Mo-Dettes, "White Mice"
Sandy Nelson, "Let There Be Drums"
Parliament, "Tear the Roof Off the Sucker (Give Up the Funk)"
People's Choice, "Do It Any Way You Wanna"
Pete Rodriguez y Su Contunjo, "I Like It (I Like It Like That)"
Pylon, "Gravity"
Ricardo Ray, "The Nitty Gritty"
Nancy Sinatra, "Lightning's Girl"
Millie Small, "My Boy Lollipop"
Frankie Smith, "Double Dutch Bus"
Spoonie Gee Meets the Sequence, "Monster Jam"
Yma Sumac, "Taki Rari"
The Supremes, "Love Is Like an Itching in My Heart"
Sylvia, "Pussy Cat"
Talking Heads, "Warning Sign"
Toys, "Attack"
The Ventures, "Out of Limits"
Betty Wright, "Clean Up Woman"

Club 57 was a creature of the East Village, where cheap tenement accommodation drew in East European Jews during the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries followed by Puerto Ricans and Dominicans in the postwar era. The area also emerged as a hotbed of countercultural activity during the late 1960s and early 1970s when the Fillmore East on Second Avenue and the Electric Circus on St. Mark's Place combined psychedelic rock performance and immersive multimedia effects supplied by groups such as the Joshua Light Show. Punk aesthetics surged to the fore when it became acceptable to sleep with a hippie but not be one during the 1970s. When Allen Ginsberg moved to 437 East 12th Street in 1975, having relocated to the East Village in 1952, he was joined by so many like-minded artists the tenement came to be known as the Poets Building. Because space was so tight, residents got out as much as they could, and the willingness of the SVA student crowd and others to turn Club 57 into an expanded living room became a major factor in the venue's development.

Even if Strychacki was the first to shape Club 57 as an East Village hangout, and although he continued to tend the building while smoothing neighborly relations, his main contribution turned out to be his empowerment of "chief

scientist" Magnuson, who "had the enthusiasm, the energy and the stamina to take the crazy brilliance of the club and the ideas of its members and turn them into things that really happened."[5] Harnessing the energy of punk, the thrill of suburban escape, the freedom of cheap living, the comic potential of kitsch pop culture, and the twist of hallucinogenics, the venue came to resemble a giant television set that could be tuned to a different channel at the click of a suggestion, just as Magnuson dreamed it. "I lived for creating a new theater experience every night," she recalls. "The vibe was just total freedom." When *New York Magazine* referenced the venue in March 1980, it described it as "one of the wittiest of the new clubs."[6] Anarchy, parody, libidinousness, and performance were making a stand.

The Mudd Club had been open for a year before a vague rivalry began to take shape. Dressed as a character in Jean-Luc Godard's *Alphaville*, Magnuson approached Amos Poe at the White Street launch, hoping to land a role in a future movie, and she returned on a regular basis right through the spring of 1979. "My first impressions of the Mudd Club were, 'Great, a new place to go on our nightly club-hopping escapades!' " she remembers. Admittedly she didn't identify with the Mudd Club's atmosphere of exclusivity and also recalls being "a little suspicious" of Steve Mass, "who seemed to be this weird, moneyed nerd who wanted to exploit a downtown aesthetic" that she "felt was already well in place." Yet it was only when Club 57 started to motor in the autumn of 1979 that a low-key, largely jocular competitiveness emerged. Soon after Mass began to hire Magnuson and her friends to work at his spot.

At times Club 57 and the Mudd Club 57 resembled chalk-and-cheese siblings. Whereas the St. Mark's locale attracted a barely-out-of-college crowd that turned out to be ever-willing to engage in frivolous activity, the White Street spot drew in a more mature and self-consciously serious demographic that included some who looked down on their precocious counterparts. "They were more of an annoyance than anything else," notes Ken Aronds of the Club 57 posse and their whacky activities. Distinguishing the spots in polar terms, Straub concludes that whereas Club 57 was grounded in "creation," the Mudd Club reveled in "destruction," and his view was echoed by Scharf, who characterizes the St. Mark's spot as "groovy" and the White Street venue as "cool."[7] Dressing for special parties, Club 57-ites tended to piece together vintage outfits, whereas Mudd Clubbers regulars preferred S/M gear, severe uniforms, and minimalist chic. "They dressed like characters in a new wave film, whereas we were much more into laughing and bright psychedelic colors," observes Magnuson. "We tended to take nothing seriously and that can be an affront to people who are taking things way too seriously."