

## 'Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor' Charts a Kinetic Scene in the Early '80s

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Book cover: D.J. mix at the Mudd Club in Tribeca, circa 1980. (Tom Sawyer)

If Tim Lawrence had wanted his third book, *"Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor, 1980-1983,"* to go pop, he would have titled it *"The World That Made Madonna,"* picked a different cover, and added a chapter or two focusing on her. He wouldn't need to do much more.

The years covered in his book were the crucial early ones of Madonna's musical and cultural development, when she was seeing the same shows, perusing the same galleries and dancing on the same floors as everyone from CBGB's punks to the Bronx rappers making their way downtown to perform with increasing frequency.

But Madonna is not the focus here because everything surrounding her is the focus. Using a single character as a lens would have worked against Mr. Lawrence's thesis: that the New York party culture of the early '80s is of interest because it allowed the intersection of a wide array of subcultures, which sent sparks flying. Gallery owners and graffiti artists, punk bands and hip-hop D.J.s, performance artists and budding entrepreneurs all commingled—and, as *"Life and Death"* amply demonstrates, left defining histories not only on one another's work, but sometimes on the forms themselves.



Book cover: Jean-Michel Basquiat as a D.J. in 1980 in the lounge at Ann's in Tribeca. (Steve Deitz)

Mr. Lawrence, a professor of cultural studies at the University of East London, provides a lot to chew on, sometimes too much. Occasionally his paragraphs are weighted down with alphabetical lists of, say, every notable band that played at a particular club in a given year—like a garnish that overwhelms the dish. And he revises his thesis a few too many times, particularly unnecessary since he spends so much time showing that intermingling in action.

The focus here is clearly music. Mr. Lawrence even includes some D.J. playlists for the listener to investigate. But *"Life and Death"* is more expansive than that—it takes you deep into a time and place, the good-old-bad-old-days-of-pre-Rudolph-Giuliani New York, which many have vacationed for some time now. If the 1970s have been thoroughly examined, the early '80s have been left relatively unexplored, and while Mr. Lawrence provides a lot of minutiae, he also delivers a story with some sweep.

Once again, Mr. Lawrence's heroes are the night crawlers of '70s and '80s New York dance clubs. His first two books focus on a pair of men whose cultural reach far outweighs their personal fortunes: David Mancuso, proprietor of the foundational disco the Loft in SoHo; his first party was on Valentine's Day 1970 in "Love Saves the Day"; (2004); and the mercurial, wildly eclectic Arthur Russell in *"Told On to Your Dreams"* (2009). Obscure in his day, Mr. Russell, a coltish with still-improbable resumes that include chamber compositions, plangent pop songs and a handful of extraordinarily creative disco 12 inches, is now the focus of a thriving cult following fed by a series of reissues.

Those two men also make appearances in *"Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor,"* but as part of an ensemble cast that's hardly short on star power. Others includes the artists Keith Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Fab 5 Freddy (Fred Brathwaite) and David Wojnarowicz; the D.J.s Grandmaster Flash, Afrika Bambaataa and Jajul Jones; Beatrice; the young Busi M.C.; Melle Mel and Russell Simmons; Blondie's Deborah Harry and Chris Stein; and, yes, Madonna, who finally arrives on Page 248, appearing live at Danceteria, where, by her third show, her fee will outstrip the promoter's budget.



Book cover: Fred Brathwaite, a.k.a. Fab 5 Freddy, in 1980. (Robin Greenman)

They, along with scores of others, were hitting clubs in this era, and Mr. Lawrence makes a light but case for the sociocultural value of clubs as meeting places for artists of different disciplines, particularly in New York, where property values were still low after the city's near-bankruptcy in the mid-'70s. Though perhaps this was already beginning to change. As Mr. Lawrence notes, "After a long slump, the real estate business was in high gear," reported architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable in the summer of 1980.

By 1981, Steve Mass, founder of the Mudd Club, says, "There was this explosion of 20-odd clubs. Everyone was starting a club based on the fact that it cost no money. One of my bartenders went down the block and started doing nights in a strip club."

Mr. Mass's spot, which opened in Tribeca in 1978, was the first of what would be called "rock discos" at the turn of the '80s. Live bands played alongside D.J.s, and the D.J.s tended to refuse to play straight-up disco, though many kept things danceable, even before beat-matching became standard among club jocks. But Mudd Club also helped shift New York clubbers' concept of cool away from the halcyon of Studio 54 in Midtown, with its infamous velvet rope. Mischievously, Mr. Mass had a blacksmith create an industrial chain and stanchion for the Mudd Club's entry, loading "The velvet rope was designed to keep the people looking taste, the underclass, away. But I took the velvet rope and devalued it."

The art world gets special notice here, in particular the trajectories of Haring—gay, sharp, friendly, and dead of complications from AIDS by 1990—and Basquiat, a magnetic presence who in addition to becoming a world-famous artist also dabbed in music: He would die in a heroin overdose in 1988.) Basquiat played in the experimental quartet Gray and produced K-Rob vs. Rammellzee's still stunning hip-hop 12-inch "Beat Box," issued by Profile Records, whose executive Cory Robbins turned down Basquiat's offer to make artwork for the sleeve because "he would make more money if he stuck with the standard Profile jacket." (The earlier original, Basquiat-designed cover, pressed in small numbers on a tiny label, now fetches as much as \$1,500.)



The author: Tim Lawrence.

Basquiat even occasionally spun his own, decidedly undisco mix of records in clubs, including to Johnny Dymall, a Mudd Club and Danceteria D.J., that "Anyone who can't dance to John Coltrane can't dance."

As the mid-1980s approached, downtown wasn't so carefree anymore. When 1982 came to a close, Dow Jones was up more than 200 points over a year earlier, bringing silly money to an area unused to it. "An era shaped by deepening inequality, accelerating commodity consumption and an obsession with surface image was making its presence felt," Mr. Lawrence writes.

He quotes Michael Zilkha, founder of the "mutant disco" label ZE Records: "A lot of it had to do with the Reagan ethos." Mr. Zilkha says, when everything "started to revolve around money. The more you retained your leftist ideals the more alienated you became."

Ann Magnuson, the address and 1980s party promoter, sensibly says near the book's end, "Don't romanticize having no money?" Then she adds: "But would I rather be a 22-year-old now or back then? Back then, absolutely."

Michaelangelo Matos is the author of *"The Underground Is Absolute: How Eclectic Rock Music Conquered America."*

*Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor, 1980-1983*

By Tim Lawrence

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